

interzone

interzone

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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substantial new stories by **Ray Cluley**
Carole Johnstone
E.J. Swift
Tyler Keevil

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David Langford's Ansible Link • Nick Lowe's Mutant Popcorn • Tony Lee's Laser Fodder • Book & Film Reviews • Readers' Poll

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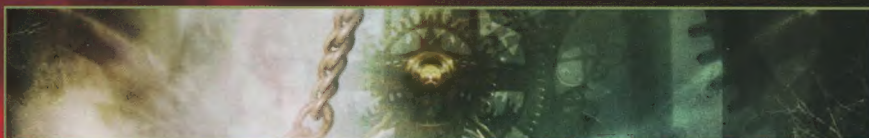
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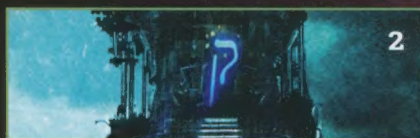
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benbaldwin.co.uk



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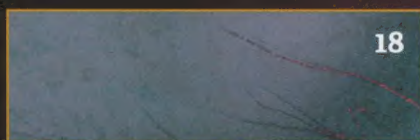
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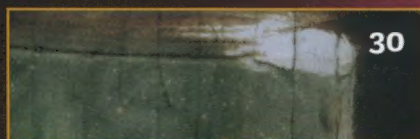
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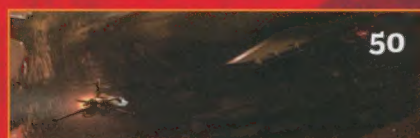


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The series of covers that I'm looking forward to producing for this year's issues will be focused around the imagery and symbolism of some of the Major Arcana of the tarot deck, although I'll be using these images as a source of inspiration and ideas rather than producing completely accurate representations of the cards involved. I find them quite fascinating with their cryptic but archetypal imagery, but they also encourage a creative interpretation; each card has the ability to tell a story, and a sequence of them could have a lot of narrative potential depending on how they are viewed. So to produce a series of these images for the covers of a magazine of speculative fiction such as *Interzone* seems to me like an interesting concept.

I've chosen the Moon as the first card in the sequence for a number of reasons but mostly because of its links to crossing a threshold and to imagination, dreams and fiction. However, to keep in the spirit of using tarot cards, and to make it a bit more of a game, I'm not going to plan in advance which cards will be in the rest of the sequence. Instead I'll wait until each individual cover has been completed before going back to the tarot deck and drawing another trump card at random. This way there'll be a small element of mystery for us all in how the covers will play out and whether they lead to an easily interpreted story or not. It is my aim that the covers can be looked at in a fairly straightforward way without too much recourse to occult theory and symbolism; that by just seeing what the picture represents it can then be related it to the covers that came before.

Ben Baldwin

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



As Others See Us. *Spot the Omission* Dept: The December *Good Housekeeping* announced a £25,000 'Best Novel from a New Author' competition in collaboration with Orion Books. Entries can be in 'any grown up genre – whether it's historical romance, whodunit, comedy or international spy thriller.'

Harlan Ellison's plagiarism lawsuit against the *In Time* film-makers was voluntarily dropped after Ellison actually saw the movie: 'It's conceivable that he wasn't very impressed.' (*Hollywood Reporter*) Meanwhile three more people are separately suing James Cameron and Fox for stealing their uniquely original scenarios for *Avatar*, while the *Cowboys and Aliens* makers are under attack by a litigant who invented the concept in 1994 – unaware, perhaps, of Howard Waldrop's 1987 'Night of the Cooters' and various storylines in the 1950s *Space Western Comics*...

Awards. *Gaylactic Spectrum* (gay and lesbian sf/fantasy): Kathe Koja, *Under the Poppy*. • *UK New Year Honours*: Penelope Lively, author of *Astercote* (1970) and several more fine children's fantasies as well as adult literary novels – one of which won the Booker – was made a Dame. Maggie Gee, who has written some sf and fantasy, received the OBE. George R.R. Martin wasn't eligible but contented himself with being *USA Today's* 2011 Author of the Year.

We Are Everywhere. Realising that it's time we catalogued the Big Dumb Objects strewn through interstellar space by enigmatic Forerunners, the Australian

National University advertised for two Research Fellows in Galactic Archaeology.

Stephen Baxter learned that his former fan site *baxterium.org.uk* is now devoted to the sf dream of cosmetic dentistry: 'Good God!'

Bea Ballard, J.G. Ballard's daughter, broke silence in a newspaper interview about the John Baxter biography of her father that – as summarised by the subeditor – 'brands him as racist, sexist and a stranger to truth.' (*Telegraph*) 'I do feel some of the things presented as fact in this book sully important aspects of my father's and our lives.' She has 'compiled a six-page list of the most obvious factual errors in the biography.'

Theology Corner. Father Gabriele Amorth, the Vatican's former chief exorcist, pinpointed two manifestations of hell while introducing *The Rite* – another movie about exorcism – at an Umbrian film festival: 'Practising yoga is Satanic, it leads to evil just like reading *Harry Potter*.' (*Telegraph*)

Another Lawsuit. Jeff Kinney's 'Wimpy Kid, Inc' company – whose bestselling *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series has been spoofed as *Diary of a Zombie Kid* (2011) by Fred Perry & David Hutchinson – is suing the latter's publisher Antarctic Press for copyright and trademark infringement. (PW) A previous lampoon, *Tales from the Crypt: Diary of a Stinky Dead Kid* (2009), was labelled PARODY in big letters and escaped legal reprisals. US protection of parodic works may yet save the not-so-labelled *Zombie Kid*.

Peter James, thriller author, has been promoting *Perfect People*, about a geneticist offering a designer baby service selecting for traits like empathy, or the ability to survive on very few hours' sleep per night. The Radio 5 Live host asked him if this could be sf: 'No, it's about the science of the near future.'

Magazine Scene. *Realms of Fantasy* and *Zahir: A Journal of Speculative Fiction* have ceased publication. John Joseph Adams's *Lightspeed* and *Fantasy* have merged.

J.K. Rowling gave evidence at the Leveson phone-hacking enquiry in November, and Sky producer James Old commented: 'Needless to say the public seating area of the room is full. A sane and

sensible looking lot. No crazed *Potter* fans in here.'

Thog's Masterclass. *Neat Tricks Dept.* 'She reached into her pocket and pulled out her fist.' (Kiki Hamilton, *The Faerie Ring*, 2011) 'My hands are already dirty just from

setting foot on this planet.' (Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson, *Hellhole*, 2011) • *Dept of Fractal Geometry.* 'Lily glanced into courtyards as they passed and saw the children coming out of tiny doors in their school uniforms...' (M.T. Anderson, *Jasper Dash and the Flame-Pits of Delaware*,

2009) • *Woodshed of Gross Anatomy Dept.* '[I] shuddered as the denatured alcohol corroded its way through my GI tract, not stopping until it reached the basement, where my tailbone and testicles resided like an old croquet set.' (Joseph Gangemi, *Inamorata*, 2004)

R.I.P.

Gilbert Adair (1944–2011) Scots critic, translator and author whose two genre novels are sequels to famous children's fantasies – *Alice Through the Needle's Eye* (1984) and *Peter Pan and the Only Children* (1987) – died on 8 December. He was 66.

Mick Anglo (1916–2011), UK comics writer and novelist who created the British superhero Marvelman (much later renamed Miracleman) in 1954 and wrote over 730 issues of this and related comics, died on 31 October aged 95.

T.J. Bass (Thomas J. Bassler, 1932–2011), US author whose linked novels *Half Past Human* (1971) and *The Godwhale* (1974) were highly regarded (but not, alas, followed up), died on 13 December. He was 79.

David Bedford (1937–2011), UK composer fond of fantasy, sf and astronomical themes, died on 1 October aged 74. Explicitly sf work includes the 1989 concept album *Rigel 9* with Ursula K. Le Guin, and a 2001 cantata adaptation of *The City and the Stars* with Arthur C. Clarke narrating between movements.

Cheetah-Mike, a chimpanzee claimed to have played Cheetah/Cheetah in 1930s Tarzan films, died on 24 December at a supposed age of 80. Many chimps (more than one per film) appeared in the role; whether any from the 1930s really survived to 2011 has been questioned. A debunked rival claimant, Cheetah, died on 3 January.

Les Daniels (1943–2011), US author of the 'Don Sebastian de Villanueva' historical vampire novels beginning with *The Black Castle* (1978), died in early November.

Václav Havel (1936–2011), Czech

playwright, poet, dissident, politician and former President of the Czech Republic, died on 18 December aged 75. His plays satirised Soviet bureaucracy through such sf-flavoured devices as absurd artificial languages in *The Memorandum* (1965) and a demented computer in *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (1968).



▲ **Russell Hoban** (1925–2011), American but long UK-resident writer best known for the remarkable children's fantasy *The Mouse and His Child* (1967) and the sf narrative tour-de-force *Riddley Walker* (1980), died after long illness on 14 December; he was 85. Many of his other novels, such as *Pilgermann* (1983) and *The Medusa Frequency* (1987), were threaded with fantastic themes.

Glenn Lord (1931–2011), US agent for the Robert E. Howard estate, editor of Howard collections and author of *The Last Celt: A Bio-Bibliography of Robert Ervin Howard* (1976), died on 31 December; he was 80.



▲ **Anne McCaffrey** (1926–2011), Irish-resident American who as the much-loved author of *Dragonflight* (1968) and many related books needs no introduction, died from a sudden stroke on 21 November. She was 85. Another popular work with several sequels was

The Ship Who Sang (1969). Her honours include the Hugo (she was the first woman to win one for fiction) and the Nebula (she and Kate Wilhelm were the first female winners) for *Dragonflight's* component stories 'Weyr Search' and 'Dragonrider'; the SFWA Grand Master Award in 2005; and entry to the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2006.



▲ **Ken Russell** (1927–2011), UK film director whose work ranged from the bizarrely to the brilliantly eccentric, died on 27 November; he was 84. Films of genre interest include *Billion Dollar Brain* (1967), *Tommy* (1975), *Altered States* (1980), *Faust* (1985), *Gothic* (1986), *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988) and the Poe remix *The Fall of the Louse of Usher* (2002).

Ronald Searle (1920–2011), celebrated UK cartoonist perhaps best known for St Trinian's and Nigel Molesworth, died on 30 December aged 91. Genre-related work includes sf daydream sequences in the Molesworth books written by Geoffrey Willans, spoof mythology in his solo *Zoodiac* (1977) and story character crossovers such as Kakfa/Lewis Carroll in *Marquis de Sade Meets Goody Two-Shoes* (1994). His style was inimitable, his range extraordinary.

Darrell K. Sweet (1934–2011), noted US sf/fantasy cover artist since 1975, died on 5 December aged 77. His distinctive work appeared on several popular series including Piers Anthony's Xanth books, Stephen R. Donaldson's *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, L.E. Modesitt's *Recluse* and Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time*.

FATA MORGANA

RAY CLULEY

THEY SAY THAT OUT BEYOND WHERE THE SEA MEETS the sky there's a city built on sand. It does not rise from the waters as our city does, enduring the tidal torture of slow erosion, but stands on land that curves up like an oyster shell. They still have trees there. They do not catch their water when it falls but pull it up from the ground in buckets. I think of this place every day that I'm fresh-lining, but I no longer look for it.

This city, my city, rises up from the waters as if pushed from an ocean that no longer wants it, and I hate it with equal force; a colossal cairn of crumbling concrete, vomited from the depths. At the water, tarred timbers reach out like rigid straight-edged tentacles to form docks and jetties and wharfs and piers. All the same thing, really, but words are all I have in abundance. I'm an upman. Watersiders and lowfolk, they're the ones rich enough to have everything else, living in the cool shadows of the city. It stands tall at its centre but leans like a listing vessel at the edges, age-old buildings worn weary by passing tides. Climbing walkways and perimeter decks and bridges connect them and on the tops of these buildings, solar panels flash and dazzle as rain-funnels shine dry, sprouting from collection barrels like metal nests mimicking those of the gulls. The seabirds nestle in all the remaining space so that all I see of my city is smeared with shit.

"You heat-soaked? Sun baked your brains, boy?"

Jared is not my father. It is the only good thing about him.

"If people don't get their water it'll be us they blame. Come on, flood the lines."

He doesn't wait to see if I obey. He knows I will. When his red face has disappeared below and I'm sure the trapdoor is closed, I call him a sifter.

Turning the tap, I feel the pipe fill and hear the water's journey as it rushes through the fresh-lines across the roof and over the edges. Following the sound with my eyes is how I spot the leak. I'm only a few seconds into my count so it's worth fixing now before too much water is wasted. I take the cup and catch the dribble, grabbing a handful of putty from its spot beneath the tank, kneading it, squeezing it. By the time it's supple enough



Ray Cluley has written several stories for our sister magazine *Black Static* (he has one in the current issue), and this is his second appearance in *Interzone*. His work (from *Black Static*) has been reprinted in Ellen Datlow's *The Best Horror of the Year Volume 3* and translated into French for *Ténèbres 2011*. He has several projects in development at the moment and he blogs about them occasionally at probablymonsters.wordpress.com.

to use I've got a quarter cup of spill and my count is nearly half done. I patch the hole quick.

Time's up. I twist the valve closed and the fresh-line gurgles, coughs, and dries.

I should pour the caught water back into the tank but it's too hot to climb so high and there's only a little. Dregs, really. I check each roof around me – no one – then tip the cup quick, relishing the mouthful that wets my lips and cools my tongue. It's the only perk of being a roofer, apart from the prestige of being slightly more than just an upman.

I put the cup back beneath the tank but not in the shade, letting the sun dry the evidence.

Drinking it has only made me thirsty.

A gull settles on the wall in a flurry of feathers as if angry at needing to land here. It busies itself with a moment of grooming, beak buried behind its raised wing. It hasn't seen me emerge from behind the tank and catcher. I've long since realised they're too sensitive to sneak up on, and our traps only catch the young ones yet to learn. This one's a scrawny specimen, but meat enough to lunge for –

It's gone before I'm even close, taking to the sky with a cry that matches how I feel at the loss of it. I can't bear to watch it fly.

Someone below, on one of the jetties, waves. A watersider, waving to an upman! Amazed, I wave back only to realise he isn't waving; he's gesturing for me to do it, go on, jump. Laughter from the men with him reaches me even all the way up here and I step back from the edge embarrassed, wondering how long it will be before I do finally leap from the walls.



DINNER IS FISH-HEAD WITH A THIN OILY SOUP THAT HAS me picking scales from between my teeth throughout the whole meal. I'm careful not to let Jared see.

"Early start tomorrow," he says, slurping at the little flesh there is and spooning soup after as if to remove the taste.

"Are you out hauling?"

I try not to sound too eager, but if Jared is boatbound then I could have days without him.

"No." He spits a bone. "I meant early start for you. Get a job. Not all the docks are down and they always need a sifter, especially now."

I wonder if he heard my earlier insult.

"What about you?"

"Installing a new cage. Waterside two, can you believe that?"

He laughs.

Someone is either very optimistic or very foolish.

"Fucking idiots," Jared says, making his opinion on the matter clear. "Still, pays a wage."

I run my fingers around the bowl to get the last of the soup. I'm finished before Jared, of course, though I'm no quicker.

"May I go out?"

He eyes me over the top of his spoon. "Where?"

"Waterside walkways. I thought I'd try and sell a few pieces."

He sucks the spoon clean and waves it at me. "They only buy that crap because it amuses them to see it on their shelves, lets them joke about what an upman will do to make a bit of line. It reminds them of their own fortune."

Fortune: wealth and luck. You have to be an upman to see both meanings together.

"Yeah, sure, go." He spits a bone. "Sell as much of that driftshit as you can." He gestures with his spoon again before dipping it to a bowl he now has to tilt. "I doubt you'll get much."

I excuse myself from the table and collect what he calls driftshit. It is drift wood mostly, some flotsam, some jetsam, but it isn't shit. Assessing each piece, I cradle the most precious in the nook of my elbow where my shirt, thin as it is, will cushion it. I take mostly gulls. They sell better waterside, the people there less likely to see one up close.

"What about those?" Jared gestures to the ceiling. It's cluttered with various hanging pieces, some of which chime in the breeze.

I like them. They're mine. "They're not in the way."

"I don't like them. I keep waiting for them to crap all over the place."

I've added feathers to the ceiling ones but they still look far from realistic. I nod anyway.

Jared grunts his satisfaction and eats the rest of his meal as if I'm not there.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR IT?"

"Two hooks and line."

The woman looks it over as if doubting its value but I know I've got her. I show her again how pulling the cord dangling from its belly makes the wings flap. She takes the bait.

"Five hooks," she says, "I don't have much line. What I have I'll need to hang it up with."

"You don't need to hang it from the ceiling," I tell her, reeling her in. "Look."

I've made a stand that slots into a prepared hole. "Put it on a shelf, it'll still work."

She thinks about it but offers me five again. I accept because others down the walkway are watching and I want them to see a sale before I proceed to where they're gathered.

"What you got there?" one of them asks. He's a young man, not long out of his teens. About two years older than me. His white shirt has seen cleaner days, and his trousers glisten with fish scales, but his wrists display the wealth his clothes do not. Several bracelets of silver and gold jangle as he points at my wares. I can already sense he means to humiliate me in some way so I'm careful not to sound defensive and I aim my sale directly at him.

"I'm sure you already have lots of gulls," I say, the pun all the more successful for exaggerating my upper accent, "but there's no such thing as too many, is there?"

The others laugh but he only smiles. The evening is still early, both moons shining their light with fresh brightness, but this lad is eager for some entertainment. I try to provide it so he won't have to.

"These don't cost as much as other gulls, either."

"You think I have to pay for them?" His hand goes casually to his pocket and I've no doubt he has a knife. A simple fishing blade, maybe, but it will gut me as easily as any other.

I nod. "Dinners, clothes, jewellery? I'm sure you pay a lot for them, treat them well."

The girls eye him with new appreciation. He smiles at them with enough left over for me. Eager to support this claim of generosity, he asks, "How much?"

I only ask for line this time. I'm careful not to ask for more than he can afford, but it's more than the piece is worth. The piece doesn't matter, though, not now. It's all about the spending. "I'll have two of them."

I'm quick to look down as if selecting the best pieces from the basket, hoping the lantern on the rails keeps my grin in shadow.

I give him two of the better birds I've carved, each made from a single piece of wood, and close the transaction with, "Deal."

He unwinds some line and cuts it with the knife I knew he had. I pocket it, waiting for the second length. But a second length does not come. I prompt the man with an open palm. He slaps it away. "I gave you what you asked for," he says.

"You asked for two."

"Yes," he says, standing straight, smiling. "Fine bit of haggling, I thought."

I've plenty more I can sell, and I've not ventured more than three decks waterside; part of me reasons this even as I clench my fist. But he's laughing by then and I can't help it.

The punch catches him right on the chin and snaps his jaw around. There's a collective gasp and someone calls out for a lockup but I move in closer, drop my basket of goods, and hit him again, in the stomach. He staggers backwards, more to get out of the way than from the force of the blow. A friend of his kicks me in the shin, the knee, and I topple. He kicks me again as I fall. I think I hear my collarbone snap but it's someone stamping on my dropped carvings. Wings splinter, beaks break, and shapes I've salvaged and twined together fall apart. The basket is left as a nest of ruin.

Most of them are running now, yet one lingers. A girl, judg-

ing from the skirt hem. I can't bring myself to meet her face, so I groan at the decking. Then she turns, kicks the basket, and runs with the others.

The basket skitters across the walkway, hits one of the support rails, and tips over the side. I close my eyes but it does nothing to block out the splash, the pieces reclaimed by waters I once rescued them from.

ON THE WALK BACK I ONLY ACHE, BUT IN THE MORNING when I wake I'm in quiet agony. Chin to my chest, I can just about see the mottled bruise there. It hurts if I inhale deeply, but I'm lucky my prominent collarbone is intact. My leg, though, has a knot of fire around the knee. I cast back the thin sheets and see it's swollen to twice the usual size. It has the consistency of a jellyfish. Pressing gently moves a fluid around the joint. I can use it, but every bend feels like the skin will rupture and leak. My shin has fared better – it's bruised, with a raw scrape of glistening pink new skin, but unless I touch it there's nothing to remind me of the injury.

A barrel lid atop an overturned bucket is my bedside table and scattered on its surface are three broken models I'd managed to save, toys that spilled from the basket before it fell. Two are gulls, one with a missing wing, and the other is a squid with hollowed pipes amongst its tentacles to chime in a breeze. There's a loose spool of two tangled lengths of line, and a ring of five hooks, too. The line brings a smile, despite my wounds. I'll fish today if I have time. I know a quiet place. Hopefully I can sell what I catch for the rest of the line I need.

"You up?"

His call replaces a knock and my door opens as I tell him, "Yes."

"I said up, not awake. Come on."

If he sees the bruise on my chest before I pull my shirt on, he says nothing about it. The covers are over my legs. He tosses my trousers at me.

"You have the cage today, don't you?" I know he does, I'm just trying to put him in a better mood.

He snorts. "Yeah. And because it's second level there won't be any frame in place for it so it'll be a bitch, I'm sure."

Not the response I'd hoped for, but then he sees the few pieces I have left and smiles. "That's all you got left, eh? Good."

I'm quick to correct him before he can ask for a cut of the profit. "I only sold two. I lost the rest. Dropped them."

His easy shake of the head is worse than any scowl or reprimand. "Get a job while you can. The sharks are coming."

He doesn't close the door behind him.

The window of my room is still black with night, but the one in the hall outside my room is greying as I watch. I pull my trousers on and step outside before the rosy glow of the rising sun can mark my lateness.

The air is fresh and night-chilled. The tang of brine is more taste than smell and I make the most of its clean, sharp, saltiness as I begin my winding descent of the walkways. It's slow going because I have to hobble and even as early as this there are many people passing between buildings. I slow even more near the place where I was beaten.

Wedge between two of the boards is a bottle-stop I'd shaped from the cork of a salvaged buoy, something I'd carved into a

plump fish. The prominent tail, designed for pulling the stopper from the bottle, rises from the walkway for me to retrieve, but I don't. Bending so low would hurt, and straightening up would hurt worse, so I leave it and make for the corner stairs, continuing around the building in a spiral that pulls me down as inevitably as a whirlpool.

On waterside two I stop to rest and I think of Jared as I lean against the railings, looking below to the narrow canals where a few boats are stirring. He's right, it's foolishness to put a cage in at this level; there's little chance the tides will rise high enough to flood the houses two storeys up. Yet I find myself admiring their optimism, and I'm reassured that even this low down, where the wealthy are as fat as the fish they catch, people still dream of something better. That, or they're flaunting their riches with the prestige a cage can bring.

There was a time I used to want to be a cager. When I was younger I could think of no better job than installing the devices because it would allow me access to the homes of those I could never be. I longed to see how they furnished their houses, to see if they really did decorate their walls with painted art despite the inevitable tides. I even toyed with the idea of swimming into one when the high tides came but I was too scared that I'd trigger a cage and be the one caught inside instead of the shark it was meant for. I even dreamt about it for a while. In some of the dreams I was trapped inside *with* a shark and we thrashed out our battle in bubbled silence. In others I simply drowned whilst admiring things I would never possess.

I preferred the shark ones.

Later, my ambition was to be a fisherman. Not because my father was, but because I could think of nothing better than sailing away from a city that held me like a lobster trap. The fact that I've tried before is why none will have me. They think I'll jump ship at the first sign of merchant vessels or pirates. They're right. I like to think that's what my father did, too, though I'm told a rogue wave washed him to his death. If he'd fled, abandoning me and my mother, Jared would've told me by now, blamed me by now. Jared is my mother's brother, and she killed herself when she was left with a child to raise on her own. Jumped from the roof and went right through the deck of a trade barge. Jared had to pay for the damage.

"Are you alright?"

It's a young woman who asks. Rich, from the looks of her skirts and beads. She wears a necklace of pearls. Yes, definitely rich. Beautiful.

I rub quickly at my eyes but the only salt water there comes from the occasional spray of wind swept waves. "Yes. I'm fine."

I'm uncomfortable around anyone lower than mid-level. Watersiders make me aware of everything I'm not, even if they don't mean to, though usually they do. I forget my knee in my haste to get away and stagger with a cry of pain, the swollen joint reluctant to hold me. I catch the railings before I can crumple completely.

She doesn't come anywhere near me. I could fall at her feet and she would only stand back. I recognise her skirt.

"He always goes for the knee," she says.

"Piss off."

She ducks back as if avoiding a blow and for a moment seems hurt. Then her painted eyes are as dark as a shark's and a smile

twitches the corner of her rich red lips. "Spoken like a true up-man."

She leaves me with the lingering scent of citrus perfume, swept away quickly by the next ocean breeze.

THE SKIFF I'VE BEEN GIVEN IS A CLUMSY HUNK OF TIMBERS that keeps turning in the water however smoothly I punt. Oily water slops over its short-planked sides so that I have to stop and bail it out when the craft tips portside. The going is slow but not without its pleasure. I'm doing something, I'm waterside, and the smells are as rich as the people who live here: the wet odours of freshly caught fish; the aroma of rotten boards and damp rope; even the occasional bitter whiff of what slicks the surface is pleasant enough, as slight as it is. The jetty, though, the one I've been tasked with clearing, is near the wash. Because it's near the wash, it needs frequent sifting. It won't smell pleasant there.

It takes almost an hour to make what should be a twenty minute punt. The current gets stronger leaving the centre, but it's the poor quality of the vessel that slows me most. Eventually I can see where the pipes run out from the city. Some rise high like rusting whales, tops dry (but not for long, not this time of year), whereas others are only revealed when the waves dip low, though rafts mark their location. In my childhood I'd row to those pipes for the crabs scurrying there, back before it became an industry. Now men and women wait on rafts to sweep the shelled treasures into buckets. It's been a long time since I've eaten one.

Here, as strong as the current is, the stench of the city's waste is not carried away as quickly as the sewage itself so I pull a handkerchief up around my face. Now when I raise the punting pole between each push it is foul smelling and sometimes thick with muck. It's a smell that lingers, permeating every wood grain, every crack of wall plaster. No one lives waterside here; it's all warehouses and boatslopes, and mostly abandoned ones at that.

Ducking low, I slip beneath the walkway and into an artificial dusk. The pole comes up and rests in the boat with me now; it'll be paddles from here on in.

The water is cleaner than I had expected, but there are enough floaters to justify my employ. Most of the tidying consists of simply scooping these up and casting them further out to sea using a short handled oar with a wire mesh instead of a paddle. The current does the rest. The wash. Occasionally, though, there will be items to scavenge as well. A piece of drift wood caught between jetty supports, or a length of timber bobbing with the waters. Pieces of broken barrel. There's a bonus payment for such things, but salvage law claims they belong to whoever hired the sifter finding them. I'll often stash them and return for them in secret instead.

I'm reaching out to scoop something I'd rather not look at when I see the loose coil of rope. At first I think it's a snake and I snap back from it quick, but when I realise the green is algae and not scales I whoop my joy and gather it aboard, heedless of the slop that coats it. What I had supposed was a flat head is actually a thick knot I've no doubt I can untangle. It'll give me something to do tonight because this is something I'll keep. I need it.

I'm still smiling from the discovery when I find my next prize. It smacks against the city wall with a sodden sucking sound in time with the rise and fall of the gentle waves. One corner of it's caught where a crossbeam angles up from the water and the rest of it billows fat with water as the tide slaps it against stone like an incompetent ghost. It's a sail. Only a small section, and torn, but a sail nevertheless. I paddle to it with fast eager splashes and bundle it into the boat, laughing with delight as it slops like dirty laundry, not caring about the wet dirt that streaks my arms and rolled sleeves. I tug carefully at where it's caught and discover it's anchored there by a small pulley. A pulley! That, too, comes into the boat. It sits atop rope and sail like a finishing gem stone.

I sift the rest of the shit with a happy enthusiasm, dipping the mesh and flinging muck as far as I can from beneath the jetty.

Then I see the fin.

I withdraw much quicker than I had with the imagined snake and drop the mesh paddle in panic. Luckily it falls into the boat but I don't appreciate that until later. I fall with it, grabbing the sides of the skiff as it rocks wildly. Dirty water spills in to soak my clothes and I almost add to it with waste of my own as the fin nears, passes, sinks, and is gone. Ten metres, if I can trust my judgement of the shape glimpsed in the murky water. I look around in case it's still close, then move the skiff slowly out into the sunlight. I dare not use the paddles. Instead I grab the support beams and planking overhead and pull the vessel into the brightness of day.

Further down the docks, people have gathered on the walkway and are pointing out to sea. I can't hear their words but the excitement is clear and one or two even clap their joy, but then they weren't the ones within touching distance of its fin.

Jared was wrong; the sharks weren't coming. They were already here.

SUPPER PASSES IN SILENCE. JARED IS IN A FOUL MOOD. The sharks have come already, news which is somehow my fault even though he knew before I told him. Fitting the cage today did not go easily either, judging from his torn sleeve and the scraped skin beneath. I could fetch us as much money as he made today with my salvage, but I won't.

"May I be excused?"

I have finished my sorry bowl of clams and mopped up the salty juice with the last of our hard bread. Not because I was hungry but because leaving food when Jared is in foul temper leads to bruises and I've enough of those for now.

Jared grunts and cracks open another clam. I take that as permission to leave, gathering up my empty shells and going to my room to clean them. If broken carefully and polished to a smooth shine they will make a fine necklace or two, provided I can find some cord for them. I won't waste line.

The thought of line gives me a better idea of how to spend my time waiting for late dark. I dump the shells and take the line up to the roof.

Line fishing is not forbidden for uppers as long as we do it from our homes, the idea being, I think, that few will be able to afford the line to drop so far. There's an unspoken rule, too, that should you be lucky enough to catch anything it's not yours until it's in your hands, meaning anyone else can swipe it from

your hook if you're not quick enough bringing it up. The corner where I fish, though, does not overlook any walkways save the waterside one, and there are no windows nearby either. The problem is I rarely catch anything anyway. Nevertheless, I weight the line and cast the hook down, too high up to hear the plink as the sea claims it.

There are sharks down there, eating whatever I hope to catch. The fish come with the rising tide and the sharks come for the fish. As the waterside homes flood with new sea levels, so the people move up the building to be housed by their neighbours as honoured guests. There they'll wait for tidefall, hoping one of their cages is triggered by a curious shark. When the watersiders return to their homes they're hoping for more than salty walls and weed-draped sills; they're hoping for an air-drowned shark. If they're really lucky it will have fed recently and they can empty its stomach for the partially digested meat, gut it for the tender bellyfish, soft and descaled by digestive juices. A delicacy I will never savour. When those below are well fed they send passups to the homes above in charity, but anything that reaches Jared and me is usually only fit for baiting bird traps. Gull meat is tough, but there's pleasure to be had in devouring those that tease you with their freedom. I particularly like the wings.

Stars are emerging from the dark blue of early evening, shining like pearls forever out of reach, and the first moon is a fishhook that will catch nothing, no matter how pretty she shines, for there is nothing to catch; the sky is cloudless. I can hear the chatter of people walking below, the scraping of plates into passups across the water, and the occasional fragment of music from an ale room somewhere brought to me by a teasing breeze. Guitar music. A waste of line, Jared would say. Normally I'd agree, but not tonight.

Even with a line in my hand, time passes slowly. Usually I can while away hours this way, hoping for a bite, but tonight the fishing is merely a distraction as I wait for deeper darkness, eager to retrieve my hidden goods. The sail, especially. I sit with my back to the wall, looking at the rain tower but not seeing the barrel or the catcher. I'm thinking about what's stowed beneath the pipes and fresh-lines and how it will benefit from today's catch.

THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE OUT, EVEN AT FULL DARK. Low-folk and watersiders look for sharks by lantern light. Even on the bridges, mid-levellers are looking. There's an atmosphere of excitement; people know the fish numbers will be dropping drastically, but down here everyone's likely to be eating shark meat soon, maybe even bellyfish.

I've never tried bellyfish but I have enjoyed shark. The Atwaters who used to live below us once sent generous passups having caught not one but two sharks in their home. I remember the privilege of it more than the taste (I was very young) but Jared assures me I enjoyed it at the time. To hear him tell it, I ate most of his too, though I doubt this is true.

Someone is saying they saw one northside, pointing, and someone else nods. I can smell a kelp pipe, and most people are drinking. That, and the desire to see a fin in the water, keeps their attention away from me. Which is lucky, really, because I've no reason to be this low after curfew. Everyone here is dressed in their finery whereas I still wear my coarse half-leg

linens and a shirt that's too large and airy for this cool climate. It's stiff with salt. I've taken care to rinse away the stench of this morning's work but I'm still clearly an upman. The cut and thinness of my clothes will tell them that if nothing else does.

But the further I go west the further I leave them all behind. I'm entering the throttles now. There's nothing salvageable in the throttles. It's an area of narrow alleys with few walkways. Sewage not taken by the wash gathers here. Hollowed buildings are concrete shells and nothing more. Not even the poorest upper would dare move to these lower quarters because the buildings are so very unstable. Often there will be the sound of some interior collapse, and occasionally entire buildings fall into the sea, eroded by a current that rushes through them below, unseen. The throttles is an area suitable only for the city's turbines and though they don't lean quite as much as the buildings around them you wouldn't want to stand near them during a strong wind or violent tide (though at least once they fell they'd be legal salvage). There are fewer lanterns here, then scarcely any, then none at all and I negotiate my way by moonlight. Walking the boards instead of passing beneath them, I have to trust they'll take my weight. With many of the planks leaning into the sea, I'm putting a lot of pressure on my injured knee. If I fall... Well, I could *try* to swim if the current didn't take me. And if a shark didn't chew me into chunks.

Thanks more to luck than careful consideration, the path to the sail, rope and pulley is relatively upright and suitably sturdy. I suffer only one agonising slip, stumbling when a board shifts beneath me. It wrenches a cry of pain from my throat at the same time it wrenches my knee and I go down, scrambling desperately for a handhold before I can slip into the unforgiving blackness of the sea. I make the rest of the way in an old man stoop, one hand on the boards to steady myself and the other clutching my throbbing knee.

It's worth it.

The sail has had no chance to dry, folded and pressed beneath the broken stone of a window sill, and it smells rank. Nevertheless, I take off my shirt and wrap the sail around myself, grimacing at the clamminess of its soiled cloth, clenching against its coldness. I secure it like a towel after bathing and make double sure by tying the rope around me, too. I slip the pulley into my sandal where it nestles uncomfortably between the arch of my foot and the soft leather.

My shirt is instantly sodden the moment it's back on. Patches soak into the area around my midriff, but if I stay in the shadows I should be alright.

Where the walkway slopes into the sea I don't so much hug the wall as cling desperately to its rough surface, pushing fingertips into cracks in the stone. Twice I pull away large scabs from the crumbling plaster, sea-bruised segments that come free in an avalanche of deposited salt. I don't slip this time, though, and the pulley stays safely wedged beneath my foot. I hobble homeward, smiling.

"Shark-spotting, are you?"

It's a lockup. I've turned the corner into a small group of people and he's one of them. His uniform isn't so noticeable in the dark, and the regulation hat is tucked under one arm, but the decorative gathering of net tucked into the left epaulette makes his occupation clear, as does the boathook baton he carries.

The people with him are watersiders. No one else would wear such extravagant clothing, such an excess of fabric.

"Well?"

"Yes, shark-spotting."

"Anything?" That comes from one of the fatter men. He's looking out to sea rather than at me.

"No, sir."

"What is that awful stench?" one of the women asks. She's as pale as the moons, as if she's never ventured from the shaded areas of the city. She probably hasn't. Unlike the man, she is looking at me, not so much for an answer but because I *am* the answer.

"Smells like the wash around here," says another. I try to limp past them. There are cries of disgust and people move away from me, fanning the air around them.

The lockup gestures for me to go quickly. "Go on, back to the upper levels with you."

"Yes," says the woman. "Go on. Scum rises to the surface."

They laugh. I look at the lockup but there's no help to be had there for he's grinning broadly at the woman's joke.

"I'd watch myself if I was you," I tell the woman.

She reacts like I've wiped fish scales on her shawl.

The lockup raises his weapon and takes a step towards me. "What did you say?"

"The jetties," I explain, "They slip into the sea around there and the planking is rotten in places. Watch yourself."

The woman sniffs, a practiced display of disdain, but immediately regrets it because of the soft wet smell that lingers on me. I can't help but smile.

The baton strike is swift and hard. It knocks my head forward and sends me staggering, the strain on my knee enough to make me squeal with pain. The watersiders are laughing again. The lockup points his baton up before putting it away. "Go home. Before you see more of a shark than you'd like, little fish."

"Little fish? He's barely bait."

They're still laughing as I limp my way over the connecting bridge. A shadow passes in the water beneath but I pay it no heed at all.

I STRETCH THE SAIL OUT ON THE ROOF AND WEIGH IT DOWN with broken brick. There's a small area beyond the range of the catcher, and the barrel casts no shadow there for many hours of the day, so it will soon be dry. The rope, too, I lay out on the ground. The pulley I stash with everything else in the bundle I've stowed beneath the pipes.

THIS YEAR THE TIDES RISE HIGHER THAN I HAVE EVER known. Fresh-lines to waterside are closed down and the next day I'm closing those that run to waterside one. People moving up have barely settled into their new homes when they're moving up again, taking their hosts with them. It's never happened, and those on the second level are honoured but unprepared. We don't get to house any, of course, being roofers, but the tide brings us plenty of work gathering the boards that have come away from submerged walkways. It's frustrating, loading boats with useful lumber I can't steal: we're in teams overseen by lockups. There are more of them now, patrolling the canals and new waterways, walking the decks where watersiders now reside or

have stored belongings. Everyone's looking out for sharks.

I'm hooking a railing that has great potential, muttering under my breath at the loss of it, when there's a call for our group's lockup from an old man on the near corner.

"They'll need you for crowd control," he yells.

"Why? What's happening?" our man asks. He's been alright to work for, rolling up his expensive sleeves and getting stuck in with the rest of us hauling broken boards from the sea.

"They've pulled something out of the water."

"Shark?"

I don't know if he means actual shark or shark victim.

The old man only shrugs and joins the gathering crowd on what was once a walkway but is now a jetty.

"Let's go," the lockup tells us. Either he doesn't trust us with the salvage or he wants to share the excitement. You can never tell with a lockup, they have the same tricks as fishermen.

We merge with the crowd to see.

The body is long, about four metres from tip to tip, and as fat around as a ship's wheel. A large fin has been torn from its back leaving only a ragged ridge. Another fin hangs tattered from its right side, held by a hand-span hinge of skin. The gills have been opened up wider than they should be and scoops of flesh have been bitten out of both sides.

"Flotsam ox," says someone beside me. Her voice is familiar but I know very few women so I turn to see who it is. It's the woman with the necklace of pearls. She smiles briefly, not sure how I'll take it, and I realise she's talking to me. She points. "See its mouth? It doesn't have any teeth, just those bristles. It swims around with its mouth forever open, sucking food from all the crap in the water."

I manage to speak, though my mouth is suddenly dry. "A sifter."

"Hmm?"

"That's what it's called."

"Oh? I thought the books -"

"Probably do. We call 'em sifters though."

It's an interesting and gory sight. One of the men rolls the body over. There's a gasp from everyone and the conversations pick up. The stomach has been chewed into strips like fleshy seaweed.

"Can a shark do that?" the woman asks me.

I don't know, but I want to answer her. "Why would it? They taste revolting."

She laughs, but I'm telling what I know firsthand and when she realises she stops.

"You only eat bluescales and sabrefish," I tell her. It's meant to bite but I'm looking at my feet when I say it.

"That's right," she says, "With lashings of kelp stems and a sauce made from squid ink. We eat out of giant clam shells with cutlery made of pearl."

She smiles with her joke. I'm supposed to smile back, but hers is as dazzling as a sun-flash on the sea. To shield myself from it I return my gaze to the hollowed sifter, knowing how it feels.

"I'm glad your knee is better," she says.

I could reply if I wanted to; everyone else around us talks of teeth size and tidal rise. But it took a week for the swelling to go down, and even then there was a bruise for another week, so I only shrug.

With nothing else from me she says, "I liked your birds."
My salvage group is being ushered back to the boats.
"I have to go," I say instead of thanks, leaving her in the crowd.

THE STORM SURPRISES EVERYBODY. NO OLD TIMER FEELS it in his bones, no gulls cry of its approach – it is simply upon us. First warning is a flash of light, and then the crash of a large wave. As an outskirts building we hear it loud and thunderous, and the clouds rumble with its echo. When the rain falls it's a sudden hiss lashing against the walls and a flash of lightning shows how it comes into our windows at an angle that's nearly horizontal. Jared and I topple our chairs in haste to hook the sill troughs in place, inside and out. They begin to fill as if fresh-lined, the rain is falling so heavily.

"Set buckets down!" Jared calls. I should have been doing it already. Using the damp floor to guide me for the best placements, I do as I'm told. "And move the damn furniture!"

The furniture is not ours. As the sea level continued to climb, so did the anxieties of the lowfolk with even third level dwellers moving up the buildings, a whole entourage, now, of guests in tow. What had begun as a frivolous atmosphere of novelty has become strained. I'd suggested to Jared (in such a way that he thought the idea was his) that we could benefit by housing their belongings. Warehouses, those with dry space, were charging more than twice the usual line. We could do it for less and profit from the fears of those finding themselves more waterside than expected. It had been a good idea. Until now.

"Cover it all up!"

We have mirrors in ornate frames, carved chests bound with rustless metal, and crates stacked on crates holding thick-stitched clothes. All of it is too costly to replace or repair should anything happen to it. I shove it this way and that, away from windows we have to leave open, covering it with what little tarp we own.

Jared is tipping full buckets into our bath for storage as every receptacle we have fills. Once the bath is full, and all the pots and pans and buckets with it, we'll drop the shutters down and secure the windows. Until then, the storm rages inside our home.

"We'll end up paying for these things," Jared yells, coming back for another full bucket.

I'm struggling with a writing desk and I knock him. I think it was an accident. He drops the bucket and water spills.

"Idiot!"

Jared sets the empty bucket down and collects another in its place, continuing to pour valuable fresh water into our tub. Every time he comes for another container he throws another accusation or insult at me. "You're as useless as your father. Don't think I'll be jumping if you ever leave."

As if I haven't tried. I'd clamber up a slave ship if they came close enough, no matter what swam around the vessel.

Jared's blow turns my head around, an open handed slap that puts a flame in my cheek and blood on my lip. "Don't just stand there, shift it."

For a moment my fists clench but before I can retaliate, if I even really intended to, there's a flash and a roar and then a heavy thud above us. Not so loud that the barrel has fallen, but perhaps one of the pipes has been wrenched from its support.

"Well? Go!"

I run the ladder rungs but struggle with the hatch. My first thoughts are that it's held down by something but it's only the wind I wrestle with. As soon as I've got it open it's torn from me. It slams against the roof with such force that the topside handle splinters free. It skitters away in the gale.

I'm soaked immediately. The rain stings my face and arms like thrown fishhooks but I barely feel it once I've seen what's happening. The sea rolls in at such height that a ship could sail between the waves without showing mast or sail to those looking for it. As they near the city they roll over the breakwater defences and crash against the outer buildings with enough force to topple rain barrels, although maybe it's the wind doing that. Roofers are scrambling around like me, trying to repair or prevent damage.

On our roof a set of fresh-lines have fallen from their supports. They don't seem to have ruptured but it's hard to tell. More alarming is the way the barrel rocks on its stilts, pulled this way and that. The funnel's catching as much wind as rain.

I'll have to collapse the span.

First I check underneath. My things are still wrapped and bound, still secure, but they won't be for much longer if the barrel topples because it'll pull the fresh-lines and pipes up with it like the roots of a rotten tooth.

I clamber the barrel ladder quickly, kicking off my sandals so I can grip each rung with my toes. Above, the thin metal of the funnel thrums its protest as it's bent out of shape by fierce and frequent gusts. I only hope enough of its original shape remains that I can collapse it quickly.

I crank the handle and it splits as it should, each side rolling around the perimeter towards me. I'm glad I've kept the bearings greased, but as each panel slips under the next, so the funnel become more vulnerable to the winds, catching them like a sail. I turn the handle quicker, quicker, quicker.

"Get it down!" Jared yells from the trapdoor. He can see that's exactly what I'm doing. "Come on, barnacle!"

He only calls me barnacle when he's particularly angry or disappointed. I grew up thinking it was a fondness, a term of endearment, until he explained how it meant he was stuck with me.

Thankfully the funnel folds all the way around. I reach and twist the support lock open and the whole thing collapses down against the barrel side, nearly taking my arm off with it.

"I hope you were quick enough," Jared says, "We can't afford repairs for that as well."

We have never once paid for it to be fixed. I have always repaired it.

He drops back below so I check my things again. They're fine. For now, anyway. I'll try and get them down to my room if given a chance.

Across the roofs there's a scream and I see one of the funnels tear loose, but it wasn't the sheered metal I'd heard; someone clings beneath it, borne away into the winds.

I can't help but feel jealous, though I know he'll fall into waters rough with teeth.

THE RAIN STOPS IN THE NIGHT, BUT THE WAVES STILL SWELL their way through the canals in rolling surges come morning.

Boats have been lifted and dropped, resting on docks and walkways. Bridges have been washed away. People are returning to hurriedly vacated homes to save what they can of their belongings. Some curse the damage, but many are happy and excited. They may not have been prepared, and they'll never catch anything without cage fixtures, but there's prestige attached to how wet your dwelling gets and that's a powerful remedy for a few battered beds and dressers.

On the west side of the city, waves crash against the walls they don't simply roll over, casting spray into the air as a salty drizzle carried by the winds. The bigger vessels rock on their moorings and the smaller ones have lowered their masts to be safely stowed under cover. I can count only four at sea: two shark trawlers; a squid scoop; and a brave dredger collecting what's been tossed free of the seabed, keeping the sand for the glassworks. The day is a sullen grey, darkness on the horizon moving away from us like a slow oil spill in the sky. I'm not so young I don't remember oil.

I'm on the roof, funnel spread out beside my tools in the pretence of fixing it when the truth is I've dismantled it unnecessarily. Jared occasionally checks I'm working, and he sees me doing exactly that. He doesn't see what I'm actually fixing.

The cool breeze I work in, all that's left of the storm, is a welcome one after the baking heat of the last few weeks. My skin's wet with salt instead of crusty with it, chilled and alive, fresh. I unfasten my shirt and let it blow about me.

When I hear the knock on our door I ignore it, knowing Jared's down there, but when I hear the voices coming up from the walkway I look down to see. I'd heard the long drawl of watersider politeness, and it jarred with the crisp pronunciation I was used to hearing from them, the derisive tone they reserved for uppers. It made me curious. But I'm too slow: when I bend over to see beyond the ledge all I catch is a finely dressed man disappearing from view. Disappearing because he's coming into the house.

Well. This is strange. Either he's reclaiming something of his property, or he's leaving some, our new roles as custodians the only reason I can imagine he'd need to visit. Yet even so, why not simply send someone? Perhaps he's here to inspect the fresh-line system after the storm, in which case I had better gather up my things.

I roll what I'd been working on into the grotty sail and bind it together with several lengths of salvaged rope. I'm quick stowing it but nobody comes. Only the wordless murmur of voices below.

I raise the trapdoor just enough to hear. Jared I recognise well enough, though I can't hear what he says. From the sounds of it they are walking each of the rooms. The few we have, it won't take long.

They come to the ladder as I begin my descent of it.

"This is my nephew," Jared says.

I slide down the last rungs and turn to bow polite greeting.

The man is plump and soft looking and dressed in a variety of purple cloths. I can't help thinking he looks like one of the exotic fruits I'd seen on a market platform. He has a length of line coiled at his belt; his type will never use it, only spend it. I look with longing, for it's strong and there's plenty for my task. For a ridiculous moment I even consider stealing it somehow,

though I have never picked a pocket in my life, let alone lifted such a treasure from someone's belt.

"Your shirt," says Jared.

For a moment I think he's lamenting the poor quality of it, apologising for its threadbare state. Then I remember it's open. I button it, greeting the man courteously. "May your nets be forever full." Perhaps a little formal, but the man smiles and so Jared smiles.

"My, you are as tanned as leather," the man says. I don't know if he's being friendly or rude or simply exclaiming his surprise because he is as pale as the fishbelly he undoubtedly scrapes aside as passups.

"And just as worn," I tell him, smiling so he knows it's a joke.

He laughs rather than smiles, a more generous response than the comment deserves, and offers his hand. At first I think I am to pass him something and then realise I'm meant to shake. I wipe both hands down the legs of my cut-offs and offer one, convinced it's still slick with the fish oil we use to grease the funnel mechanisms. If he notices, he's gracious enough to ignore it. His grip is stronger than I expected but brief, as if one shake exhausts him. Perhaps my calluses chafe.

"I hope you don't mind, but your guardian has extended the benefits of your quarters. He has welcomed us as guests for a few days whilst the tides rises."

What?

"You're all more than welcome," Jared confirms.

"All?"

"Oh, my family." He gestures me to my own living room as if the place is already his. "My wife, Caita, and my daughter, Anika."

"And this is Throy," says Caita, noting her husband's lack of introduction. She says it with a smile but the tightness of it reveals her discomfort. She will be polite, but she'd rather be elsewhere.

I don't care about any of that. The girl smiling at me, Anika, is beautiful. And of course, it's the girl with the pearls. The girl who likes my birds.

"Good day," she says.

I repeat it, not knowing if it's true.

THE EVENING MEAL IS SURELY DELICIOUS BUT I TASTE nothing of it. The main dish is an entire flank of sabrefish, and how Anika grins at me when her father lays it down on the table! Steamed muscles are scattered around it as decoration, the shells awash with a rich sauce of trade herb I can't identify because we've never been able to afford anything like it. There's crab, too, which I've not had since childhood, and a bowl of squid as accompaniment. And eels. It's more food than Jared and I have ever seen all at once. The sight of it puts us in a state of shock that makes conversation difficult. The sight of us at dinner does the same to our guests, I'm sure.

"You have some remarkable pieces," the mother compliments in an attempt to start conversation, looking around at the mismatched furniture. "A curious mix of styles but all very fine quality." She gives a short laugh like the tinkling of breaking glass and adds, "So much for the stories of passups and illegal line fishing."

Anika realises the error and looks down at her bowl, taking

more care opening the shellfish than is necessary.

"Yes, it is very fine. We're glad you like it," I reply before Jared can explain and embarrass her.

Anika smiles down at her food. Her foot accidentally touches mine beneath the table, or mine hers. My foot is bare, the sandals under my chair out of habit. Hers are booted. I pull away before I can mark the soft sealskin. I pull away so hastily that my chair scrapes and she sits up startled.

Everybody looks at me as if I've grown as many tentacles as the side dish.

"So how does the sea fill your pockets," Jared asks, all too bluntly, "fish, trade, oil?"

The mother mutters something into her handkerchief (we have no napkins) but Throy swells like a blowfish and says, "Yes," before bellowing with laughter that deflates him, "all that."

Jared says he'd fill a few reels with line if only he didn't have me to care for. As if he does.

Throy nods politely.

"How long do you think you'll stay?" Jared asks.

Caita looks anxious for an answer to that, too. Moving so high up had been Throy's idea. It appealed to his sense of fun and adventure, giving him something novel for future after dinner conversations. He admits as much, adding, "Why move, and move again?" The way he says it, though, looking at his daughter, suggests he quotes someone else and I wonder if the idea was hers. She smiles at him.

"I'm sorry about your basket," Anika says when she thinks no one else is listening, the others talking of tidefall. "It was an accident."

"What was an accident?" Caita asks.

Kicking my life into the sea.

"I was clumsy," I explain.

Anika smiles again, this time at me.

"Can't be clumsy, young man. You maintain the fresh-lines, don't you?" Throy sucks up flesh from broken shells. "Keep the barrels full so we all get fresh water?" He's either genuinely interested or very good at being polite.

"Well, I don't keep them full, sir. I leave that to the rains."

"Ha!" He breaks open another shell. "Very good."

"There's been plenty of that lately," says Caita. "You won't need to use the desalination unit for a while."

She isn't being rude, I don't think, but again Anika winces. She, at least, knows we don't have any such thing.

"We have a bath *full* of fresh water," Jared announces proudly, as if it's ours.

"My!" Caita laughs, Throy joining her when he's swallowed his mouthful. "That is extravagant," she says. "And to think we've been told roofers live in squalor, eating scrawny birds and hawking refuse!" She laughs so much I fear some of her will spill from her dress like two plump jellyfish.

Jared laughs with them, nervous at first, then fully immersed in the mirth he has created without any idea of how.

"Can we see the roof later?" Throy asks.

"No." I've stunned them into silence.

"Well, it's a bit of a mess," Jared explains. "Since the storm." Though he smiles my way I can tell from his eyes that I will pay for my rudeness.

"It's dangerous," I add, as if that had been my concern all

along. "There are low lines and storm debris and people fall all the time."

"Oh."

"See," says Caita, pulling a bowl of seaweed closer and rummaging through the fronds, "they fall. They don't jump. Why would anyone jump?"

"We hear terrible stories," Anika explains.

Stories.

Even Jared looks subdued, but he recovers quick enough when Throy offers, "More squid?"

I SIT ON THE ROOF, BACK PRESSED TO THE CORNER, A LONG line in my hand trailing down over the wall behind me. We don't need the food, but I need something to do and with our new guests I dare not work on my project.

Anika sleeps in my room. Or she lays there trying to. I wonder if she thinks of me up here but such thoughts serve little purpose so instead I wonder what she wears. It will be warm for her up on this level, warmer than she's used to. Perhaps her nightdress, or the lack of it, will reflect this.

The thought makes me smile and I pull the line up without waiting for a catch, having thought of something else to do.

THE ROOFS ARE BUSY WITH PEOPLE RAISING BARRELS, replacing funnels, fixing fresh-lines, but I've already made repairs and I'm able to busy myself at the task I most like working on. I carve curves from a soft piece of driftwood and place each finished one on a cloth, ready to wrap them up quickly if I need to. I become engrossed in the work, rubbing at each piece until it's as smooth as the inside of an oyster shell.

I don't hear the trapdoor open, but a breeze brings her perfume to me and I look up to see her watching from the hatch.

"You are so careful," she says as I pack the pieces away. I don't know if she means the care I take making them or the precaution of hiding them. She climbs up to the roof. "Are you making another model?"

I can't speak to her. I don't know how.

"You have some pretty things in your room."

I don't want to stow the pieces when she's watching. "You know they're not mine."

"Not the furniture," she says, "the models. The sharks are very good."

I had whittled a few small sharks and set them on pegs, thinking I'd sell a few after the tide to those who'd failed to catch one. They aren't much, but my banter should shift them well enough.

"You shouldn't be up here."

"Why not? You go down to the water, why shouldn't I come up to the roof? I'm fed up with people telling me what to do." She looks around. "It doesn't look dangerous at all."

I have tidied everything away and even swept the roof clean. I told myself with each pass of the brush I was doing it because it needed doing and not because I thought she might see.

"Will you teach me to make those models?"

"No."

"Why not? Are you worried you won't be able to sell them if I can make them too?"

No, I'm worried that I will fall in love with somewhere I can never hope to go.

"That's right."

"I don't want to sell them," she says.

I look and see she's at the wall now.

"Amazing. This is what the city looks like."

She puts her foot on the wall and I fear for her, thinking that now she's really seen the city the natural reaction is to jump. I go to her quickly but she merely turns and smiles, resting on her raised leg. "I think my city is nicer," she says.

"Yes."

We look at all the funnels reaching for rain. We look at the colours of the sea around us, and the expanse of it that keeps us here.

"They say that beyond where the sea meets the sky there is a city built on sand," I tell her.

She looks to sea and frowns. "The sand would wash away and the city would fall."

"Our city falls. It crumbles every day, one piece at a time."

"True." She checks to see where I'm looking and I quickly turn my gaze to face outwards. She leans close to look the same way. "Where is it?"

"I don't know."

She laughs. "You haven't seen it?"

"Sailors say –"

"Sailors say? Sailors say a lot of things that aren't true. And not only to women."

"Fata Morgana. That's what it's called."

I cannot fathom the look she gives me, nor the sad smile, but then her attention is caught by something behind me. Her eyes widen and she laughs. "What is *that*?"

On a neighbouring roof a man and boy, done with work for at least a moment, are reaching to the sky.

"You've never seen someone fly a kite?"

She shakes her head. "Kite?"

All her privileges and I suddenly feel sorry for her.

"How do they do it?" she asks, holding my arm in her excitement. "How do they make the – kites? – move like that?" She cannot see the strings. All she sees are people commanding the kites in spectacular arcs and dives. "Is it magic?"

I watch with her, enjoying how her hand feels on my skin, the way her laughter returns in a breeze of delighted wonder.

"Yes," I tell her, "it's magic."

She lets go of my arm and takes my hand and we watch the diamonds in the sky, each of us amazed for reasons of our own.

IN THE NIGHT, WHEN I AM SURE EVERYONE HAS GONE TO bed, I creep down from the roof to my room. The door is propped open to let a breeze pass through. I avoid how it creaks in the way practice has taught me.

Anika lays looking at my ceiling. Occasionally she reaches for the bird I have hung there and makes it perform its futile flight, movements that carry it nowhere. She wears the thin gauze sheet that is my bedding and, judging from how it drifts across her body when she reaches up, nothing else. I decide to go back to the roof without bothering her at the same time that she realises I'm there.

She sits up, clutching the sheet to her chest. "Are you spying on me?"

I can only shake my head, thankful she hasn't screamed.

"Have you come to reclaim your bed?" She lets the sheet drop slightly to show a milky expanse of shoulder.

"Come and see," I tell her.

I leave before her reply can disappoint me.

Long moments pass, but she comes to the roof. I had assumed she wouldn't, but the trapdoor gives a slow groan as she tries to open it quietly. She has dressed herself in a long gown, probably the type a waterside girl is supposed to sleep in. She has taken the time to brush her hair, and her eyes have the sooty colour of makeup around them. She looks beautiful.

"It's cooler up here," she says. Her tone accuses me of having the better sleeping arrangement, as if good manners would have been to make her a bed roofover.

She has come all the way out onto the roof but the door behind her remains open. I move to close it and she steps away quickly.

"In case any body hears us," I explain.

"Hears what?"

She has crossed her arms over her breasts to hide them, though a moment ago she was close to showing them in the shadows of my room and I realise she is not entirely the confident woman she wishes to seem.

I pick something up from the wall and make a gift of it to her.

"What is it?"

I thrust it forwards, eager for her to accept it. She does.

"A kite?" She's forgotten to whisper.

Finger at my lips, I nod.

She admires the diamond of sail I've stretched over slim piping, the tail of ribbon. "I don't have the magic," she says, whispering again.

I untangle the line I've used, which is almost all I have. "Hold this. Don't let go."

I cast the kite into the night and the wind takes it, up – up – up!

Anika laughs. There's nervousness in it and the line unravels quickly as the kite soars higher.

"Hold it tight," I instruct her. "The line."

She holds it firm and the wind tugs the kite in her grasp. Between them they hold it in the sky.

"Pull that one. That line, there."

She yanks on it and the kite dives to the left with a suddenness that startles her. She releases the line with a gasp and it curves up again.

"Gently," I tell her, with a tone that matches.

She commands the kite's next turn with more control, sweeping it low to the funnel before allowing it to ascend for the stars. She pulls the other line without my instruction to make it drop right and soar once more.

"Come and help me," she says, though she doesn't need any.

For more than an hour I stand behind her in the dark, holding her hands as she pulls at strings we can barely see.

ON THE THIRD NIGHT OF OUR SECRET KITE FLIGHTS, ANIKA tells me they're going home. "In the morning," she says, "after breakfast. The tide's already turning. Mother's lost a few rugs, and the walls need repainting, but that's all."

I nod. This will be the last I breathe of her hair. This will be the last time she shares her warmth with me, the press of her

body against mine as she leans with each move of the kite.

Neither of us say anything for a while.

"I want to let it go," she says.

"You can't."

"I know. You gave it to me, but it's yours really. There's a lot of line."

"I mean, if you let it go it won't fly."

She turns her head and looks at me over her shoulder. She's close enough to kiss, were I someone braver.

"The wind will toss it about and without you it'll just fall into the sea. You have to hold on to it."

"Oh."

She turns back, makes the kite drop to a neighbour's funnel and pulls it up again before it can be lost.

"You can come and fly it whenever you want."

"No I can't. But I'll look for it when you do."

It's not good enough, but it's good.

"I wish I could fly," she tells me. "I wish I was as free as our kite, far away from here."

I nod at her, though she doesn't see.

"Bring it down. I want to show you something."

She gathers the line back and forth, reeling the kite in as I start untying my secret from beneath the pipes. Unfurling the canvas that hides it, attaching lengths of wood and pipe, stretching canvas and hooking it over a skeletal frame, I ignore her when she asks, "What is it?" It's my most ambitious creation, worth a small fortune in salvage. Worth a long sentence in lockup if found, being undeclared. Every morning I check it's still there tucked beneath the pipes, hidden on the fresh-lines. Even when I'm sick I'm sure to do my roof duty for fear of Jared finding it. Whether he'd dismantle it for the pieces or turn me in is something I've often wondered.

"It's huge."

I position the half barrel scoop of its head and Anika claps with delight, realising what it is. I attach the wings, sail stretched over one frame, sackcloth stitched over the other. She says with more admiration than I have ever heard, "It's a bird."

It is. It's a very large bird, lashed together from all I've ever managed to collect. Even now I need more barrel wood for the lower beak, more rope, more line, and more netting.

"Look."

From how it stands on its two rusting legs (I've used a couple of harpoons and some piping for those) I can reach underneath into the rib cage. I pull one of the levers there and the wings sweep down, touching the roof. I push another and they rise up, a perfect V.

Anika gasps. She's never seen anything like it. Nobody has.

"Will it fly?"

"I hope so."

"It's too big. Too heavy."

"Well, then I'll drown. Either way, I'll get away from here."

"Why not just make a boat? *Steal* a boat?"

"Because they'll bring me back. Lock me up. But not in this."

The truth is, it won't fly forever. With very little dismantling, something I can do in the water, it *will* become a very small sail boat. But the bird has more majesty so I don't tell her this.

We both stare at it. Eventually Anika takes my hand and asks, "Will it hold two?"

It's never crossed my mind that a lowfolk life could be an unhappy one. I've always thought loneliness, misery, hunger, were things you gained as you came higher up the city, accretions building one atop the other like the formation of coral.

"My life's not so very different," she says. "I just have more things to live it with."

It would be more than lockup if I took her with me.

"It'll take two if we both lose a little weight."

I scarcely need to, but she has the beautiful plumpness of wealth.

"Finish it."

I tell her about all the things I still need. It does nothing to ruin her excitement, and I'm happy to see how she grins. Abruptly she stands on tip toe and puts her mouth on mine. The kiss surprises me and it's a moment before I can return it. Her lips are warm and I can taste mint leaf on them. We kiss and kiss and kiss and I think this must be what drowning feels like and I'm lost to everything but her.

"I'M LEAVING IN THE MORNING," SHE TELLS ME AS WE LAY looking at the moons. They are parting, and the tide's turning.

"I know."

I MAKE HER A NECKLACE OF POLISHED NACRE, EACH PIECE carefully crafted so she'll wear a flock of birds in flight. I spend hours breaking the pieces to just the right shape, neglecting my other project until it's complete. Her wearing it will be reward enough for such labours, and it helps me pass the time without her.

The chance to give it to her does not present itself for a long time. I am repairing rails on the lower walkways, ignored by all who pass me, when I hear the deep laughter of Throy. He's sharing a joke with a young man whose garments number more than I've ever owned. I know better than to greet them. Following, as if Throy is a trawler bringing bounty in his wake, is his wife and daughter. Anika sees me and smiles, though it lacks the confidence I had seen there before.

"I will catch up with you, mother," she says.

Caita stops with her. She indicates the young man with Throy. "But Basker –"

"Will not notice my absence until father stops speaking." She points at the curtained awning of a nearby trade store. "I want to buy fragrance."

I collect up my tools quietly, my face turned away from Caita. She has not noticed me, of course. She barely noticed me in my own rooms.

"Be quick, girl. I will make your excuses if excuses are needed."

Anika waits until they have turned the building before joining me at the rails.

"Here we are again," is my greeting.

It's the spot where we met.

"I dreamt of you last night," she tells me, "soaring above us all." She smiles and I soar inside. "You landed beside me and told me you'd found the city built on sand and that it was here."

"I made something for you."

I have been carrying it every day, held in my pocket, wrapped in the cleanest cloth I could find. I check to see we're not watched and hand it to her quickly. She's reluctant to take

it at first, and probably only concedes to the gift because my offering it so desperately embarrasses her and we can't go unobserved for long.

She casts the cloth aside with an absence of thought only the wealthy have, and I don't dare follow its path in the breeze in case I miss how she reacts to the necklace.

"Did you make this?"

I have no breath to answer, so I nod.

Again she smiles. Again, it looks different, new, and I wonder how many types of smile people like her have at their disposal. I only have one, but I share it with her as if I've plenty to spare.

"How is the bird?" Anika asks.

I shrug.

"Do you fish?"

"No."

"You should fish," she says. "There's much to be gained from fishing, I'm told."

It's her farewell, and as much of a conversation as I could have hoped for. "Perhaps I will, then."

She nods politely as she leaves, and I look for something else that needs fixing.

THE EVENING IS SO STILL I CAN HEAR THE WAVES LAPPING at the walls below. Sitting in the corner of the roof, I cast my weighted line behind me without watching it fall. I don't care if I catch anything.

Anika's words have puzzled me. I have stopped working on the bird to think them over. Did she mean that I should stop building it? Does she want me to stay? Is that what her dream meant?

It puts me in mind of my own dream, one I've been having ever since she left. My arms and legs are secured with ship's rigging, feet tied around a mast, arms bound at each side to the yardarm spar. There's no ship, though; I'm in the sky, the sail a tight diamond behind me. Lengths of line fish-hooked into my skin descend to the rooftop where Anika tugs and pulls and moves me. I'm a kite of flesh, anchored but flying free. I worry what it might mean.

Fish, she said. Is that where Basker's fortune comes from? Do men pluck his wealth from the sea for him? Who is he to Anika that he should be walking with her father?

A pull on the line stops these thoughts before they can really start, a sharp tug that tells me something's biting. I stand quickly, letting out some slack as I peer over the edge to see which way the line runs.

There's somebody down there. My first thought is that they're waiting to steal my catch and for a foolish moment I think of Basker. I'm about to shout at them, verbal insults all I have to throw, when the paleness of a face looks up.

Anika.

She lifts the line from the water and attaches something to the hook.

"What are you doing?"

"Ssh. Passup."

Reeling the line in I see it thicken where she's tied new cord and I pull it up to see it's attached to the handle of something, a bucket or basket. It lifts from the walkway and bumps its way up the wall to me. I'm so intent on watching its climb that I

don't see her leave. When it's in my hands there's nobody to thank.

It's a basket like the one I lost, but inside is no passup meal. Inside are things to make me weep.

I call out a thank you and it echoes around the walls of the city before disappearing into the sky. I hope she smiles, hearing it.

I did not teach her how to carve the shapes I make, yet in my hands is the most beautiful gift anyone's ever given me. Her blade work is crude, the whittling basic, and one side of the model has been shaved too thin in comparison to the other, but she has made it and she has given it to me. It's a sifter, shaped from soft balsa. A gouged mouth at one end is filled with the bristles of some brush or comb. Strands of hair are still caught within, either unnoticed or left deliberately. I remove them carefully and twist them into a coil around my finger.

She has sent up some alcohol, too. The bottle is stopped with one of my own bird corks, the one stomped between the walkway boards so long ago. I'm as touched by her retrieving it as I am by the hours she must have spent carving the flotsam ox.

I wonder if they are farewell gifts, or incentives to stay.

THE BIRD IS FINISHED. THE SEA IS CALM. EVERYTHING IS ready and has been for weeks. I fish in the evenings but catch nothing but fish. No baskets, no gifts, no notes. The only pale face that looks up at me from the water is that of one of the moons reflected there. Then one morning, taking a net I've repaired down to the docks, I see her. Anika. She's with her friends, looking over one of the ships. A merchant vessel that swarms with so many lockups it must be about to set sail. Greeting her is easy as the net is for the owner of the vessel she's looking at.

"The rooftop boy," says one of the girls with her, and I'm pleased to know I've been spoken of. "The gulls must wake you early."

"There's one on my roof that keeps me awake, yes." I look at Anika. "Maybe today it will fly away."

She looks at the decking, her hand at her throat as if to remind herself of the birds I've given her, feeling the smoothness of shell and remembering promises.

"You look thinner."

She blushes at my disregard of etiquette. "I've lost some weight," she admits, "though I've food to fill me."

"No doubt."

There's an awkward moment of quiet.

"Still here?" says one of the other girls.

"No need to be," is my answer. "I can leave any time." The last is for Anika, though she doesn't respond.

"Then run along. Go on, back to...well, whoever cares."

"How's Jared?" Anika asks politely.

Foul, is the accurate answer. "Fine," is what I tell her. "And your father?"

"The sea keeps him healthy and wealthy."

"One of his boats?" I ask.

"It's a *ship*," says one of the watersiders. I can see another looking around for someone, maybe a lockup.

"Thank you, I was addressing Anika."

The girls mutter excitedly, like I've thrown feed to nibblers.

"It's one of Basker's," Anika says.

The girls giggle again and even Anika smiles with them. They make some jokes at Basker's expense, but there's something favourable in the ridicule, like the games of a child rather than any genuine insult. I barely hear the words because Anika's hand has dropped away to push playfully at a friend and instead of birds I see the teeth of sharks at her throat. A gift from Basker. Must be.

"Does he like your new weight?"

"No, he wants to fatten her up," someone says, and another shrieks at the innuendo.

"The bird's *ready*." My voice is raised enough that the girls quieten.

"Then it should be on its way," Anika says.

"What about you? Sailing away with Basker? It's bad luck for a woman to step aboard a vessel the day it sails."

"Bad luck for who?" asks one of her friends.

"She'll have to stay over the night before then," says another.

"I'm not going anywhere," Anika shouts, at them and at me.

"What about Fata Morgana?"

"Fata Morgana? It's an illusion. That's what the words mean. It's an illusion on the sea. A mirage."

"It's not, it's real. My father saw it. He told me."

I've no idea the lockup's there until he has the scruff of my shirt in his hands. The thin fabric tears easily, gaping open to show the sun-leathered skin of my chest, the curves of my ribs.

Anika gasps at how scrawny I've become, being the only one to know how different I look. I've been starving myself to allow for extra weight on the glider and the way she looks at me, I know she knows it.

"Let's get you back up top," the lockup says, "where you can't bother young ladies." He grabs my arm this time, though it's just as likely to tear away from me as my sleeve.

"You should make another sifter," I yell at Anika, "give it to Basker. Seems he'll pick up any waste that floats long enough."

She bursts into tears at that and the lockup hits me with his baton. The first strike opens up my scalp, the second staggers me, and the third one makes everything else go away.

I'm glad.

THE SOUND OF A BOATHOOK DRAGGED ACROSS METAL BARS wakes me and I find myself in lockup.

"You've barely been in here an hour," the guard says, sorting through the keys on his belt. "No punishment at all."

He opens the door but I'm still a bit woozy from what they'd call my arrest. I pull myself up using the prison bars and leave the cage walking as a drunk would on a leaning ship.

I'm surprised Jared has paid the fine, but I'm relieved. I could bear the cell, and the food wouldn't be any worse than at home, but the thought of Jared running the fresh-lines each morning and perhaps discovering my secret salvage...

"You're lucky," the lockup tells me, and I have to agree. "I'd have left you in here for at least a day if I was her." He says this showing me into the waiting area where Anika sits. She stands at the sight of me. Her neck is bare.

"You owe her apologies and thanks," the lockup says. He doesn't wait around to enforce it.

It's Anika, though, who says, "I'm sorry."

"You're a watersider," I remind her, as if that explains everything. In a way, it does. It's meant to be the last thing I say to her.

"Wait."

I close the door I was about to leave by, but I don't turn. It's easier to stare at the grains of wood, the door handle.

"Do you know how a pearl is made?" she asks.

Of course I do. Everybody does. "Oyster spit," I tell the door.

"Yes, I suppose. An irritant, like a grain of sand, gets inside the shell's defences and the pearl forms around it."

I stare at the door.

"Look," she says. "Please look."

I do as she asks and know I always will. She has her hands together, held out for me. She opens them up like an oyster and curled on her palm is the necklace she used to wear, the pearls, each gem as smooth and as pale and as beautiful as her skin.

"Take it," she says.

I can only stare.

"You've given me much more," she insists.

"The irritant to build a pearl around?"

"No. That was me. You're the pearl. But you'll never be a pearl *here*, not in this city."

She puts the necklace in my hands and holds them.

"Use them to buy what you need," she says.

"It's finished."

"Then spend them in Fata Morgana."

I STAND AT THE EDGE OF THE ROOF WAITING FOR THE SUN to rise. I will soon do as my mother did before me, in an effort to accomplish my father's dreams. I wonder, surprisingly for the first time, whether I will find him at Fata Morgana. I dare not hope so in case it's as Anika says, a mirage upon the sea.

Her pearls circle my wrists.

I have spent a few. Food and desalination pills, some clothes. A bottle of grog waits for Jared on my table, two more pearls inside. I wonder if he'll choke on them, but I don't wish it.

He appears from below and gives me additional chores. I nod absently. He says if I intend to jump I must do it after my chores, thinking that he jokes.

When he's gone I drag the bird from its hiding place and assemble it quickly. I have the speed of practice yet I linger with the task. I load its pouches with stores of salted meat and flasks of fresh water.

It's dawn. I see, for the first time, my finished work by the light of the sun. I have painted it white and it dazzles me with its beauty and promise.

I am afraid to use it, but not so afraid that I can't. When the sun has warmed the waters I clamber into the harness and stand with my dream upon my back. I fear it's too heavy, yet I walk with my arms in its wings, fists clutching straps I've made from leather and cord.

I'd like to escape unnoticed, but there's one person I hope will see me flee this salt-circled cage. I dare not check. Below, boats sail away from the city with winds that I, too, will use. I do not look to the canals, or the roofs, or the walkways. With my chest cradled in strips of netting and my arms in wings of sail, I'm ready for the rise of my climb or the sudden sprawl of my fall...

I leap from the city walls. ♦

fearful symmetry

TYLER KEEVIL

THE NIGHT IS FREEZING AND THE FIERCE WIND CATCHES HER OFF-guard, cutting through her jacket and raking across her skin. She leaps down from the train, her backpack slung over one shoulder. The doors hiss shut behind her; the brakes wheeze as they release. She looks around. It's too dark to see any station signs. The conductor seemed to be indicating that this was her stop, but his English was about as good as her Russian. Now, as the train lurches into motion, she wonders if she's made a mistake.

The platform is open to the sky and encrusted with ice. There is one other person on it – a man standing at the far end. She starts walking towards him, and he comes to meet her halfway. He has a dog with him – a mottled brown Laika that pads along at his side. They stop within a few feet of her. He is a tall man with a bushy moustache, wearing a beige wool cap. When he grins, a row of gold-capped teeth glitters in the darkness.

"You are the animal woman?" he says. "Nicole, yes?"

She smiles back, feeling her lips crack in the cold. "And you're Vargas."

They do not shake hands. The dog sniffs around her feet, wagging its tail.



HIS TRUCK IS THE ONLY VEHICLE IN THE PARKING LOT. HE'S left it running; a plume of exhaust is billowing out from the muddy tailpipe.

"Gas must be cheap up here."

"Is not gas."

As they get closer she can smell the odour of burning vegetable oil, like a fastfood joint. Some kind of bio-diesel. There is a gun rack bolted inside the back of the cab. She stashes her rucksack beneath it and climbs into the passenger seat. The dog takes up position between them, idly thumping its tail as Vargas puts the truck in gear. Beyond the station entrance the roads haven't been cleared, but he has chains on his tyres and they plough along at a good clip, churning up a wake of snow.

"You stay at our house tonight," Vargas says. "Tomorrow I show you where the man is killed, and then you give us permission to hunt."

She can't tell if it's his accent, or his manner, but everything he says sounds like an order – as if he's accustomed to being obeyed.

"It might not be that simple."

He scowls and jabs at the cigarette lighter. Driving with one hand, he fumbles about on the dash until he finds a half-smoked cigar, which he fits between his teeth.

"Is a killer. You will see."

"It could also be a new species. Or endangered."

"We are all endangered here."

The lighter pops, emphasising his point. He raises it to his cigar. As he puffs, the orange coil casts a soft glow across his jaw. She opens her window an inch or so.

"I know you," he says. "You Americans. You live in big cities where there are no animals, so you think they are like the cartoons. You want to live with them and play with them. You want to save every single one."

"I'm not American," she says. "I'm Albertan."

He chuckles. "Is same thing, now."

She turns away from him and looks out the window. All she can see is snow smothering the fields, forests and farmhouses. It is greyer here than at home. As grey as the ash Vargas taps from the end of his cigar. Her brief warned her about that. The wording was typically convoluted, but she got the impression that if this area were part of New Europe or the Americas, it would have been deemed uninhabitable.

"Is the cough bad here?" she asks.

"Of course."

The dog has been poking around among the rubbish at her feet. It drags a tattered magazine onto the seat, and begins to gnaw the corner. Patting the dog, she extricates the magazine from its jaws. It is an old copy of *Hustler*, a special Americas edition featuring models from all the new states and territories. She flips through it. The glossy pages are wrinkled and worn. Near the back she finds Miss Alberta, sprawled on a bearskin rug and draped in an American flag, legs splayed for the camera.

"You must have a lot of time on your hands," she says.

He leans forward, mashing his cigar in a coffee cup on the dash. It's difficult to tell in the dark but she thinks his face is reddening.

"Is a gift. A joke."

"Looks like you got good use out of it."

He snatches it from her and shoves it back under the seat – the truck swerving to the right as he does so.

FROM THE REAR HIS HOUSE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A HOUSE.

It is just a peaked roof jutting up from the snow. Around the front, the walk and drive have been cleared. Like most of the others on the outskirts of town, it is a one-storey bungalow with wooden siding and a lean-to garage. The garage door is automatic, but only shudders partway up and then gets stuck; Vargas has to climb out and duck inside to lift it himself before driving the truck through.

Inside it is warmer, but not by much. Nicole can still see her breath in front of her face. She takes off her toque and gloves but leaves her jacket on. Vargas leads her to the kitchen, where a woman is standing at the stove. He introduces her as his wife, Anya. Anya glances back and smiles and continues stirring whatever it is she's cooking. Her wooden spoon makes a rasping sound against the base of the pot.

"Hungry?" Vargas asks Nicole, and she nods. "Good. We eat soon."

They sit at the table. From the next room comes the flicker and murmur of the television. Nicole recognises the familiar sounds of a hockey game: the crack of sticks, the thud of a puck hitting the boards, the low rumble of excited fans. It reminds her of home, and her father, and a time when she still had both. Glancing in that direction, Nicole sees a small boy peeking around the door frame. She does not know how long he's been there, watching her. His skin is pale as flour and his black hair seems unnaturally thin – like a baby's hair. When she smiles at him, he giggles and shrinks back out of sight.

Vargas barks something at his wife and she brings them bowls of reddish stew, thick with chunks of meat and cabbage and potato. Whatever it is, it is good. A loaf of homemade bread is placed on the table between them. Vargas grips it in his hands, tears it in two, and motions for Nicole to help herself. His wife does not join them. She waits by the stove, hovering like a servant.

At first they eat in silence. Then, halfway through the meal, the pale boy scampers into the kitchen and whispers something in his father's ear. Vargas grins.

"Her?" he says, nodding at Nicole. "She has come to play with our tiger." He adds something in Russian – perhaps repeating his joke – but his son does not laugh.

"I'm Nicole," she tells the boy.

"Nika," he says, and beams. He pats his chest. "I Nicholas."

She looks at Vargas, surprised.

"Yes," he says, grudgingly. "That is his name, too." Then, as if he doesn't want to dwell on the coincidence, he asks her, "How long will it take? What you do?"

"If I get a sample at the site, maybe a week."

He is about to eat a spoonful of stew. Now he lowers it, scowling. He says something, loudly, in Russian, that makes his wife jump. "More people will die."

"They should be warned to stay out of the area."

"They need food to eat. Furs to live."

She shrugs, helping herself to another chunk of bread. "That can't be helped. If the animal is rare, or a mutation, the process might go on even longer."

He crosses his arms, frowning. She takes this to mean he doesn't understand, which isn't a surprise. It's her area of expertise and the legality is so murky that half the time she wonders if anybody understands – or if they make it up as they go along.

"For it to count as a new species, any mutation has to be beneficial." Still he says nothing, so she continues: "If it is sterile or infertile, or if the mutation is deemed a disadvantage, the creature is considered invalidated and you'll be allowed to kill it."

Vargas seems to have stopped listening. He is idly stroking his son's head.

"Who decides?" Vargas asks her. "Who says what is...invalidated?"

He pronounces the new word awkwardly – articulating each syllable.

"My bosses at the protection agency."

Gently, he raises his son's arm, which he has kept tucked at his side until now.

"What about Nicholas?" he asks. "Would he be invalidated?"

She can see that his hand ends in a smooth, fingerless stump. Like a ball of putty. The boy smiles at her shyly, not understanding the conversation. As soon as his father lets go, he hides his arm again. Nicole lowers her eyes, stares into her stew.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't know."

They continue eating in silence, while Nicole tries to think of something – anything – to say. Eventually she asks, "You said it's a tiger. How do you know?"

"I know. That is how. Tomorrow I take you to the shack." He motions to his wife, who has been puttering about the kitchen. She comes forward to clear their bowls, their cups, and wipe the breadcrumbs away. "We must hike far. If you can."

Nicole stands up to help, carrying her own dishes over to the sink. "No," she says, her expression serious. "I can't hike. Women don't do that where I come from."

Vargas doesn't find that very funny, but his wife is smiling.

SHE AWAKES IN DARKNESS. A PHONE IS RINGING SOMEWHERE. Her nose and ears are cold, her arms tingling with goosebumps. For a split second she thinks she is back there, in her family's cabin in Northern Alberta. On those mornings when her father took her hunting, she'd learned to wake up early, without an alarm, to impress him. She rolls over, looking around. The mattress squeaks beneath her. She sees glowing stars on the ceiling, a stuffed tiger at the end of the bed. Its black-button eyes glisten back at her. She is sleeping in the boy's bed, since they don't have a guest room.

The phone is still ringing. Then, footsteps. A rumbling voice. She sits up to listen, even though she can't understand. After he hangs up, she hears him coughing, clearing his throat. That is familiar, too. That sound. It echoes throughout the house, making her shudder. It could just be morning phlegm, in his case. She hopes so.

Seconds later, he's pounding on her door.

"I'm up," she calls out.

She is, too. Already standing, pulling on her jeans.

"We go now," Vargas says, through the door. "There is another attack."

She stops buttoning her shirt, then continues, more carefully.

"No time for make-up," he says.

"I don't wear make-up."

He grunts, as if he doesn't quite believe her.

THE VILLAGE WHERE THE ATTACK HAS OCCURRED IS HALF an hour's drive to the east. On the way out of town, Vargas stops at a cluster of apartment blocks – squat and drab as bunkers. At the curbside stands a man in a parka, stomping his feet, his head framed by a cloud of his own breath. Vargas shoos his dog onto the floor, and Nicole shifts along to make room as the man climbs in.

"Is Sam," Vargas says, putting the truck in gear.

Sam pushes back the fur-lined hood of his parka. He has tan skin, prominent cheekbones, and crow-black hair hanging loose to his shoulders. He is wearing a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, half-fogged over with cold, that sit low on his nose.

"I feel real bad for you," he says to her. "Having to stay with this grumpy bastard." He jerks a thumb at Vargas. "What did he make you for breakfast? Toast?"

Nicole grins. "Burnt toast."

"Come to my place if you want some real food."

"Yes," Vargas says. "The Yuits are very rich – because the government gives them all our money."

"And your jobs. Right, Vargas?"

"Is right."

Sam chuckles and removes his glasses, starts polishing them on his shirt. He pauses to hold them up and check the lenses.

"How long have you worked together?" Nicole asks.

"Not together," Vargas says. "I am his boss."

"Sure. For now. I'm just waiting until he catches grey lung. Then I'll get his job." Sam leans forward, fiddling with the radio. "How about some music?"

"Radio does not work. Is shit."

Sam tries anyway, pressing buttons and turning dials, adjusting it through various stages of static, before finally giving up. Instead he snaps and hums to himself, bobbing his head as they drive along. The dog watches him, curious.

"So our cat got hungry, huh?" Sam says.

Nicole asks, "How do we know it's the same animal?"

Vargas snorts. "Two attacks, one week. Is the same. We must kill it."

Nicole crosses her arms, stares hard at the snowed-out landscape. They are passing an abandoned church; the roof has fallen in and the windows are thick with frost.

"For a conservationist," she says, "you're pretty trigger happy."

Sam guffaws, and Vargas jerks hard on the wheel – fishtailing around an icy pothole. "My job is conservation and protection. But people must be protected also."

THE VILLAGE, ACCORDING TO SAM, WAS ONCE A GOVERNMENT-sponsored logging camp – before the collapse of communism. Now it is a ramshackle collection of trailers, bungalows, and mobile homes. There are no people in sight, but smoke trickles from most of the chimneys and stovepipes. As they drive through, a three-legged dog hobbles out from a yard to yap at their truck.

Vargas pulls up in front of a trailer that lists at an angle in the snow – as if the supports on one end have given way. A snowmobile is parked in the drive. It looks new – the body-

work glistening blue, the undercarriage sleek and rust-free. As they get out, Nicole notices a woman standing in the window of the house opposite. She glares at them through the glass, both arms folded across her chest.

"Friendly place."

"We're not popular here," Sam says.

They wait as Vargas approaches the trailer. The door opens an inch or so, then swings wide. A bald man stands there, with a can of beer in his hand. He gestures off to the right – towards the forest the village backs onto. Vargas says something to him, raising his voice, but the man keeps shaking his head. They argue for a while.

"He doesn't want to come with us," Sam explains.

"Because he's scared?"

Sam shrugs. Eventually, Vargas manages to coerce him. The man trudges out, in snowboots and a hunter's cap – still carrying his can of beer. He leads them into the woods. The snow, as soon as they pass the edge of the village, is knee-deep, which makes the going difficult. For them, at least. The Laika is bred for the terrain, and scampers easily over the snowdrifts, stopping occasionally to let them catch up.

A few hundred yards in, the man says something and points ahead. Nicole sees an army-style canvas tent in the middle of a clearing. By the time they reach it they are all breathing hard.

The snow in front of the tent has been cleared and trampled flat. It is soaked in blood. The dog sniffs at it, wagging its tail. At first she thinks it is the blood of the latest victim. Then she notices a steel wire dangling down from one of the branches overhead. It's the kind you would use to hoist up an animal while you skinned it.

"He was trapping?" she asks Sam.

"Looks like it."

The man is explaining something to Vargas. He talks quickly, gesturing with his beer can, glancing around all the while. Nicole watches the dog. It is pawing at a pile of snow to one side of the tent. She walks over there and scratches its head.

"What is it, boy? What have you got?"

She brushes the snow away. At first she's not sure what she's seeing. The fur is frosted, the hide rigid as cardboard. An animal skin. There are others underneath.

"What are you doing?" Vargas says. "Do not touch things."

She glances back, lifts one up. "These are sable skins."

Silence. The bald man just stares at her. Shrugs. Takes a sip of his beer.

"Yes," Vargas says. "He was poaching."

He doesn't sound surprised. She looks at him, at all of them. Trying to guess what's going on. Sam is pretending to study the snowy ground, not meeting her gaze.

She says, "Then maybe he got what he deserved."

She doesn't expect the other man to understand, but he reacts violently – throwing his beer can in the snow. He approaches her, spits at her, shouts the same word over and over: "*Blyad! Blyad!*" She is shocked and doesn't know what to do, how to react. Vargas gets between them, shoves the man back, and points towards the village, ordering him to go. The man does, kicking through the drifts – still yelling at her over his shoulder. His beer can lies in the snow, sputtering foam.

She looks at Vargas for explanation.

"This man is his brother."

"Oops," Sam says.

She shrugs. She can't take it back, now.

For the next half hour, the three of them examine the campsite, treating it like a crime scene. Treading carefully. Not touching what can be avoided. The villagers, according to what the man told Vargas, heard the screams in the night. A few rushed out with rifles, but by then the screaming had stopped; the poacher was gone. They saw and heard nothing else. Or so they say.

While Sam studies the perimeter, she and Vargas check the tent. Inside they find a rug, a pot-bellied stove, and a mattress. The mattress is shredded and ripe with blood. They crouch down on either side of it. Vargas touches the blood. It is frozen.

"Why was he sleeping out here?" she asks.

"So he can skin his hides," he says, "without us finding him."

Leaning closer, she studies the mattress. It has an animal stench to it, of sweat and urine. Among the frozen gore, she spots a cluster of hairs. Maybe human, maybe not. Removing her gloves, she places the hairs in a ziplock bag. It only takes thirty seconds, but by the time she's finished her fingers are numb from the cold.

"What about the body?" she asks.

As they consider that, Sam calls to them from outside. They find him standing at the edge of the campsite, holding the dog by the collar. It strains against him, muzzle buried in the snow. There is a track there, wide and blood-streaked – as if something has been dragged into the woods. Keeping the dog on a lead, they follow the trail. Only fifty yards away, strewn across a starburst of crimson snow, they find the remains. Some ribs. A femur. Scraps of clothing. And the head, trailing a rope of spinal cord. The face has been gnawed, the nose and cheeks torn away. Nicole stares at the pieces of flesh, trying to make them fit, trying to imagine them as a man. Off to one side she notices a hand, oddly untouched, still clenching a hunting knife.

"Can I take that?" she asks, pointing.

Vargas looks at her curiously.

"The blood on the blade," she explains. "Maybe he cut it."

The fingers are stiff around the handle. She has to pry them off individually, the knuckles cracking like ice. She bags the blade carefully, without folding it up.

"Look at this," Sam says, pointing.

He has found clear prints, leading away from the carcass. They hunker down to study them. The shape – a rear pad and four claws – is definitely feline. Sam spreads his fingers and holds his palm over the print. It's both wider and longer than his hand.

He whistles. "Big fucking cat."

Vargas shakes his head. "Is too big. Too big for tiger."

"What else could it be?" asks Nicole.

Then, as they contemplate that, his dog starts barking furiously. It is looking out at the forest, in the direction of the tracks. The three of them stand up. Nicole can see nothing but snow and trees and stillness. Nothing at all.

"Should have brought the guns," Sam says.

"We go back now."

They grab the dog and retreat – stumbling through the deep snow.

THE VODKA IS COLD AND NUMBING AND SLIDES STRAIGHT down her throat like an ice cube. The aftertaste is unbelievably smooth. No bite, and no cloying bitterness. Nicole places her glass on the table and smacks her lips, accentuating the flavours.

Sam and Vargas watch, waiting for her reaction.

"That's nice," she says.

"You see?" Vargas says, holding up the bottle with a kind of reverence. It is a plain black bottle decorated with lettering that glitters like his teeth. Nicole has never heard of the brand. "I told you the Yuits have all the money, all the luxuries."

"It was a gift from my grandfather," Sam says.

He takes the vodka from Vargas and pours out three more glasses, then places the bottle next to the others they've sampled. They are sitting at the table in his living room. It is cramped and cluttered with Yuit art and paintings, and dozens of stuffed animals frozen in life-like poses. They came back to his apartment so Nicole could use her laptop to scan and upload the samples she'd found at the site. Now it's a matter of waiting, and drinking. Which, in Siberia, seem to be one and the same.

"What next?" Vargas says, eyeing the bottles.

Sam taps a clear bottle without a label, and Vargas groans.

"No – not that Yuit shit."

"It's a new batch. I filtered it better."

He fills their glasses. The moonshine looks suspiciously cloudy. As the men bicker about that in Russian, Nicole takes her glass over to the sideboard, where the laptop is set up among stacks of movies – most of them American horror films and creature features. She taps the keys, checking her email. Still nothing. Straightening, she unzips her fleece and wriggles out of it. Her chest feels hot, her cheeks flushed. Drinking always does that to her. Especially vodka. Just above the sideboard is a shelf with three animals perched on it: a crow, a squirrel, and – in the centre – a ferret. The ferret has two heads. Both its mouths are twisted into a twin-snarl, teeth bared.

"Is this real?" she calls over.

"The ferret? Caught it myself. It had two brains, too."

"Is nothing," Vargas says, thumping his chest. "I killed deer with six legs – and all legs worked. Are many freaks up here. You can make big money from them."

Sam grins. "The Chinese go crazy over the body parts. They think it will cure cancer and grey lung, and put a little lead in their pencil. And a lot of other bullshit."

Nicole nods, takes a tentative sip of her moonshine. It tastes better than she expects. "Is that what the poacher was after?"

"That," Sam says, "and the usual. Rare breeds. Endangered species."

"Is illegal, but..." Vargas shrugs. "What else is there, up here? No logging, no farming. People must eat. People must live. So they hunt and trap and kill."

"Which is where we come in," Sam adds.

Nicole nods. She is standing at the window now. It overlooks the adjacent apartment blocks, and the rest of town. There's not much to see. Everything is squat and low and buried in grey snow, like ash. Directly below, she spots their truck, and the blue tarp stretched over the bed. It is covering the sable furs that they confiscated.

"What will you do with the hides?"

There is a pause. Then Vargas says: "Evidence."

She turns to look at him. He regards her steadily, his eyes heavy with vodka. She almost challenges him about it, but doesn't. That's not what she came here for.

"Anything?" he asks, pointing at her laptop.

She checks it again. "No."

He grumbles about that for awhile. Then, "How long?"

"Normally it could be days. But I called in a favour." Passing behind his chair, she pats him on the shoulder. "I said my new friend Vargas is in a rush."

Sam laughs. "He was in a rush to get out of those woods – that's for sure."

"So?" Vargas splashes more moonshine into his glass, spilling some on the table in the process. "You went whiter than me. A snow-white Eskimo."

"It was stupid to go unarmed."

Nicole takes her seat at the table again, allows Vargas to top her up.

"Do you think it was out there?"

Vargas shrugs. "Something. There was something."

Sam nods, deliberately solemn, then turns his empty glass upside down on the table, like a magician performing a trick. "You know what my people think?"

Vargas moans. "They only think about big government cheques."

Sam waggles a finger at him. "They think," he said, "that Siberian tigers are spirits. They carry messages between heaven and earth."

"Yes. The message is: I am hungry."

Sam holds up his hands. "I'm just saying that's what they believe."

Vargas grunts. The light in the kitchen is getting dim now. Behind the layers of smog, the sun must be going down – even though it's only two in the afternoon.

"But it got me thinking," Sam continues, smiling. "Say this cat does turn out to be special or unique or whatever. Maybe that means its message is unique, too."

She can't tell if he's just needling Vargas, or if he's half-serious. Either way Vargas doesn't rise to the bait. He stays silent. Nobody speaks for a few minutes. They sit and sip, wrapped up in the warmth of the vodka. Then her laptop pings, breaking the spell. She gets up to check it, feeling light and loose-limbed as she strides to the sideboard. The men watch, expectant. She scans the email once, re-reads it to make sure. Then she turns to them, trying to decide how to play this.

"We have a saying in English," she says. "Don't shoot the messenger."

She expects anger, but instead the two men burst out laughing. They pound on the table, nearly falling out of their chairs. It takes her a moment to make the connection to what Sam said – about tigers being messengers. Then she laughs, too.

"They say it may be a new species," she tells them, gasping.

"Whoo-hoo!" Vargas says, raising a bottle in toast.

"And that you can't kill it, until we find out if the mutation is a defect."

The worse the news gets, the funnier it seems to be, until they are breathless, bent over in hysterics, their eyes watering. Nicole sinks to the floor, clutching her stomach. It aches –

actually aches – with laughter, almost like she's broken a rib.
She can't remember the last time she laughed so hard.

THE JOKE HAS WORN OFF BY THE TIME HER AND VARGAS head back to his house. For most of the drive, neither of them says anything. The heating fan rattles intermittently, and through her seat she feels the steady grinding of the tyre chains. The landscape beyond their headlights is black and grey, like a charcoal sketch. Vargas sits hunched forward, twisting his hands back and forth on the wheel. He is driving more slowly than usual; other than that he shows no signs of all the vodka he has drunk. Every so often, he coughs, clears his throat, and rolls down his window to spit – letting in a blast of icy air in the process.

He says, "If it kills more people, is their fault?"

"I know."

"Is *your* fault?"

She doesn't have the energy to argue, or the grounds to defend herself. The message was clear. The agency won't issue a hunting permit unless they can provide more information. When she asked what was meant by 'more information' the reply came back: *suggest examining site of first attack for further evidence*. She didn't mention this to Vargas at the time, but she tells him now.

"I have gone to other site," he says, banging the steering wheel. "I tell you – is same animal. If a freak – so what? Is still a tiger, still a killer. It has the taste."

"I believe you," she says, "but it doesn't matter."

Back at the house, Vargas gets out a beer and settles on the sofa to watch hockey highlights with his son. Nicole sits cross-legged on the threadbare carpet, her laptop balanced on her knees, studying the DNA analysis the lab sent back to her. Lines of code fill the screen, a maze of genomes and chromosomes, a labyrinth of proteins and nucleotides. Certain sections have been flagged by their technicians.

"What is this?"

Vargas is standing behind her, stooping to peer over her shoulder.

"The genetic sequencing of the animal. By comparing it with a Siberian tiger, they've isolated the differences in the genes. Some of them, anyways. It takes time."

He blinks at her, his eyes bleary and bloodshot. "So?"

"None of them are frameshift mutations. Most are transpositions, along with a few point mutations. They still can't tell if any are beneficial or sustainable, though."

He waves his beer. "I do not know all this. Speak English."

Nicholas comes over to join them. He leans against her, clinging to her shoulder in that overly familiar way children do. She can see his face reflected in the screen. She says, "The main alterations seem to be in size, and bone structure."

Vargas snorts. "So is bigger. We know this."

He goes back to the sofa and slumps into it, changes the channel to an American comedy dubbed over in Russian. Nicholas stays at her side, watching her work. She smiles at him and adjusts the settings – changing the lines of code into a visual DNA model. The double-helix winds its way up the screen, linked by ladder-rung bases of nitrogen compounds. It turns slowly on the spot, rippling and hypnotic.

"Tiger," she tells him.

He gapes, awestruck. Then he whispers to her in Russian, tugs her to her feet, and drags her into his bedroom – wanting to show her something. On top of his pine dresser he has an old-style gaming console, and a battered monitor. He switches both on and picks up the controller, using his bad hand to deftly operate the tiny joystick.

"Tiger," he says, beaming.

It is a hunting game. You get to pick various weapons, various locations, various animals to stalk. She watches him as he plays, eyes fixed on the screen, his mouth slightly parted. His avatar creeps around a jungle landscape, cradling a semi-automatic hunting rifle. It has a scope that allows him to zoom in and aim from afar. When an animal crosses his sights, it always goes down in a spray of blood: boars, baboons and exotic-looking birds. Before he can find her a tiger, though, Vargas appears in the doorway and growls something to his son in Russian. Nicholas drops the controller and scampers out. It's bedtime, apparently.

Nicole yawns. "We go early tomorrow?"

For some reason, she's started to adopt his curt, broken English.

"Not so early." He glances left and right, not meeting her gaze. "Is long hike, but not safe in dark. We go at dawn, in light. Then, maybe we must stay overnight."

He marches out, pulling the door shut behind him. It takes her a moment to unravel his phrasing, and grasp what he meant. On her left, a roar erupts from the monitor, startling her. Claw-marks appear on screen, which flickers red before fading to black. It looks as if the tiger has found the hunter before the hunter found it.

NICOLE SQUATS IN THE SNOW, STRUGGLING TO ADJUST THE straps on her snowshoes. The set is too big but she refuses to give Vargas the satisfaction of asking for help. He and Sam are at the side of the truck, unloading rifles from the gun rack. They've come to a forestry commission parking lot, a few miles out of town. According to Vargas, it's the closest they can get to their destination; they'll start their hike from here. The morning light is still dim, the world still locked in monochrome. A glaze of smog coats the sky, grey and hazy, so heavy it seems to be weighing down the trees.

Finishing with her snowshoes, Nicole stands up. The two men are in the truck bed inspecting their guns: checking chambers, loading cartridges, adjusting scopes.

"This is still only a research trip," Nicole says.

"I know." Vargas tucks an additional cartridge into his pocket. "So?"

"Isn't that a bit of overkill? All the hardware?"

"Is for protection only."

Sam smiles at her. "Don't worry – he's not as trigger-happy as you think."

The dog bounds up to her, its muzzle coated in snow. She rubs its head, packs down a snowball, and lobs it across the lot. The dog tears after it, snapping wildly.

"Maybe I should have one, too," she says.

They stop working to stare at her. For a moment, sitting side-by-side in bulky snowsuits, with their legs dangling off the edge

of the tailgate, they remind her of two overgrown boys, playing with toy guns.

"You can shoot?" Vargas says.

"My father taught me."

Vargas trudges over to the side door, to get a third rifle. She can see that it is lighter and smaller than theirs, and semi-automatic – not auto. But she doesn't bother to mention this. Instead she checks the safety, and takes aim along the barrel, aware that they are watching her. If it's a test, apparently she passes. Vargas grunts.

"Just don't shoot me," he says.

As they set out, she slings the weapon over her shoulder, so it rests vertically on her back. It knocks awkwardly against her rucksack, which is filled with her food supplies, sleeping bag, and laptop. She hikes between the two men, with Vargas in front and Sam a few paces behind. Looking after her, no doubt. The dog scampers around, zipping ahead and bounding back, acting as their unofficial scout.

They make good time, padding steadily through the powder. It is packed and squeaks beneath their snowshoes. Other than that the forest is almost noiseless; the snow dampens any sounds. Visibility is good because the trees – mostly various breeds of larch – are bare and leafless and spaced relatively far apart. All the branches are coated in an off-white hoar frost that looks like fungus.

"You said it's a full day's hike?" she calls to Vargas.

"Why? You are tired already?"

"I'm wondering what he was doing way out here, alone."

They walk half a dozen paces before he answers.

"If you asked him, he would say he is hunting wild boar."

After two hours they take a break. They perch on a fallen tree, without removing their bags or snowshoes. Her calves are burning but other than that she feels good. Vargas looks a bit worse off. He is breathing hard, and his moustache is frozen with snot. Filling a cup from his flask, he offers it to her first. She takes a big swig, and nearly gags – it's vodka. She hands it on, trying to take it in stride, but can see him smirking to himself. She gets out her flask of tea and drinks that instead.

"Your father," he says, tapping her rifle. "He took you hunting?"

"Sometimes. But never for tiger."

She means it as a joke, but neither of them laughs.

"We have a saying," Sam says. "If a tiger wants to eat you, you won't see it."

He pushes his glasses up his nose, cranes his neck to look around. Nicole finds herself doing the same. Studying the landscape. Trying to imagine just what, exactly, is out there. Then Vargas stands and tosses back the remaining vodka.

"We keep going," he announces.

By mid-afternoon, the shack comes into view. It is a two-room shanty, with wooden siding and a corrugated tin roof, covered in snow. Long icicles hang from the eaves, like teeth, and there are small windows on each side, overlooking the forest.

Out front, after they've removed their packs, Vargas tells her about the first attack. Because of the shack's isolation, it went unreported for several days. By the time he and Sam got out

there, it had been snowing for hours. At first they thought the trapper – a local man – had simply left. Then the dog unearthed the remains. A few bloody bones, frozen in the snow. That was all. No tracks. No other traces.

"But all his supplies had been used up," Sam adds.

Nicole looks from him to Vargas, trying to understand. They explain that they think the tiger had him trapped here, in the shack. He waited it out for as long as he could. Then, rather than slowly starve to death, he'd made a final attempt to escape.

"A cat would never normally do that," she says, "if it was only about food."

Vargas shrugs. "Maybe he shoots at it, and makes it mad."

Nicole frowns. "Maybe."

Afterwards they take her into the shack. It is as cold as outside, and smells like an old fridge. There is a table in the main room, littered with empty food tins. Mostly canned meat and vegetables. In one corner lies a single mattress, draped in woolen blankets. Opposite it, directly below one of the windows, stands a workbench. The wooden surface is well-worn and stained dark brown. Notches – as if from a blade – line the edges. Vargas notices her studying it.

"For scraping hides, cutting meat," he explains.

The other room is smaller and looks like it was added later. It has been used for storage. Among the clutter she sees paraffin cans, a set of cross-country skis, a few lanterns – the housings smoked black – and some rusty leg traps. A space has been cleared on the floor to the left; in the middle is a mound of shit and toilet paper.

"Because he was scared to go out," Nicole says, quietly.

Sam grimaces. "I will be, too. Tonight."

While Sam takes a look outside, she and Vargas continue to poke around the shelter. It's obvious he doesn't expect her to find anything. She doesn't really expect to, either. But it's what she's supposed to be doing, it's what her office wants, so she does it. On the table, among the food tins, she notices a stack of smut magazines.

She holds one up. "Looks like he goes to the same bookstore as you."

"Is not funny," Vargas says.

As she puts the magazine down, she spots a cell phone half-hidden beneath the stack. She picks it up, turns it on. There's still a bit of charge to the battery.

"No signal here," Vargas says. "Or he would call for help."

She ignores him, examines it anyway. First she scrolls through the picture gallery – mostly more porn – and then checks the videos. There are only a few, all fairly recent. She selects the oldest and clicks 'play.' It shows a man's face, talking into the camera, as if he's holding it at arm's length. He is middle-aged, with a shaved head and a scar above his right eye. He is speaking quickly, in Russian. Obviously agitated. Vargas, having heard, comes over to stand beside her.

"Is him," he says. "He is saying – it is still there. Will not go away. It knows..." Vargas pauses, startled, then goes on, "It knows what I have done."

The second video clip is dark. Too dark to see much, other than the shape of the man's head, lit up by lantern light. This time, he is whispering. Vargas leans in closer to catch it, and translates for her. "He is saying to listen, listen to it. Is close."

Nicole adjusts the volume. Faintly – through the tinny speakers – they can hear roaring, like distant thunder. The sound sends prickles along her forearms.

“The next,” Vargas says. He has started whispering, too. “Is one more.”

The final clip shows the man’s upper body – as if he has set up the phone on the table to film himself. He is sitting in a chair, wearing full hunting gear, cradling his rifle. The pale light coming through the window creates a halo-effect around his head. After waiting a moment, he starts to address the camera, struggling for words.

“Is message to his family,” Vargas says. “He says he has run out of food. He says he is going to try. He says...” Vargas trails off. The raw emotion on the man’s face needs no translation, no explanation. Then, at the last, the hunter clenches his fist and shouts something, defiant.

“He says he will show it how a Siberian dies.”

The end of the clip is him reaching out towards the camera. Nicole stares at the blank screen for a moment, before carefully placing the phone down.

“It is proof, no?” Vargas says. “That it stalks him. Is a man-eater.”

She nods, tells him it is. Though she’s still unsure what the agency will decide. Man-eater or not, if it’s a new species, and sustainable, they’ll want to capture and protect it rather than kill it. She is wondering if – and when – she should tell him that, when Sam pokes his head through the door. His glasses are all fogged up again.

“Come look out back,” he says.

Behind the shelter, the dog has found a large hole dug in the snow. It paces around the edge, sniffing and whimpering, while they examine it. The surrounding snow is dotted with paw-prints – the same over-sized tracks they found yesterday.

“This wasn’t here last time,” Sam says.

“No,” Vargas says.

“Why would it come back?” she asks.

They stand in the fading light, considering that, staring into the hole. The back wall is unnaturally flat – as if the cabin has foundations that go deep. Nicole brushes some ice crystals aside – revealing wood, scratched with claw marks.

“It’s like it was trying to get into the cabin,” Sam says.

“Or at something beneath.”

Back inside, the three of them shove the table away from the wall, and lift up the tattered rug. Underneath is a small door, with a ring set into the wood, like the entrance to a cellar. It is not locked, and they lift it easily. Below, a stepladder drops into darkness. Vargas digs a flashlight out of his bag, and climbs down first. Then he says something in Russian – short and sharp, like a swear.

“You must see,” he calls up.

The cellar is no bigger than a walk-in closet. It is a tight fit for all three of them at the same time. Vargas waits until they are down before shining his light around. They are in a kind of makeshift freezer, surrounded by shelving. Each shelf is laden with animal parts. Some in jars, some in plastic bags. She does not recognise all of them but she sees a kidney, a liver, a gall-bladder. There are teeth and claws, too. Tongues. A menagerie of dismemberment. And on the floor, piled practically beneath

their feet, are the hides. All neatly folded. The fur tawny and striped. She stoops to touch the one on top. Even stiff with frost, it feels unbelievably soft.

“I don’t want to hear,” she says, still crouched there, “any of your shit about families to feed, or needing to survive. This is a travesty. This is an abomination.”

“Yes,” is all Vargas says.

Sam is perusing the different shelves, like a clerk taking inventory. “There’s sable here, too. And lynx. All rare or endangered. He would have had help. They’d wait until spring, then haul a load out with snowmobiles or four-wheelers. Truckers or loggers would help them smuggle it into China. Risky, but the pay – ”

He stops talking; he is standing quite still, staring at something in a styrofoam cooler against the far wall. They wait, expectant, but still he does not say anything. Vargas looks at her, then steps over. She follows. When she sees what he has found, her hand goes to her mouth. In the cooler is a small animal, about the size of a large housecat. Its coat is patterned like a tiger, but the proportions are different. It is stockier, with higher back legs – almost hyena-like. Built for speed and power.

Vargas pans his flashlight along the body. It’s obviously a cub; the feet are oversized, the coat fluffy rather than sleek. The mouth is open, wide, as if it died in pain, or crying out. A leg-trap, probably. Light glints off a pair of wicked-looking eyeteeth. Something about those teeth looks wrong to her. She reaches in, uses both hands to force the mouth closed.

“Look,” she says, pointing.

The eyeteeth come down outside the lower mouth, extending inches past the jaw. Vargas mutters something in Russian again – that same swear word. *Srat*.

“Well,” Sam says, “now we know what’s out there.”

“And why it’s pissed,” she adds.

SHE IS SITTING IN A CHAIR BY THE WORKBENCH WITH HER rifle across her knees. The chair is cold and hard and she shifts around frequently. Beneath the window, a paraffin lamp sputters, giving off smoke. It makes the place stink but the window is open a crack for ventilation. She can see her breath in the light. Aside from their bodies, and the lamp, there is no heat in the shelter. Behind her the other two are stretched on the floor in their sleeping bags. Nobody wanted to sleep on the man’s mattress.

Every few minutes she opens her laptop, checks her emails. Her inbox is always conspicuously empty. Three hours ago she sent her report to head office, summarising the videos, the underground storeroom, the cub specimen. Everything they’ve found. But she hasn’t received a reply, even though the satellite link is good.

At one point she thinks she hears something. A sound out there. A low rumble. But it does not come again and when she peers out the window she of course sees nothing. Just blackness, and flakes of falling snow, flickering like tinsel in the lamplight. She stays there, studying the dark, imagining what it contains. It makes her think of that Blake poem her father used to read her – the famous one about the tiger. She can remember most of the first verse, and recites it silently to herself: Tiger tiger burning bright, in the forests of the night. What dread hand,

and what dread eye, dare frame thy...something. Thy fearful something.

There's rustling behind her. A cough. Looking back, she sees Vargas coming into the light. His hair is tousled, his capped teeth bared in a glittering grimace.

"I have a few more hours yet," she says.

She knows he gave her first watch as a favour. It's easier to stay up, than get up halfway through the night, or early in the morning.

"I cannot sleep," he says. "But maybe you can."

He pulls up a chair beside her, places his flask on the floor. When he glances at her laptop – closed now to conserve the battery – she expects him to ask about that, but he doesn't. Maybe he's already guessed. Now that the agency have proof of its ability to breed, and the validity of its mutation, there's no way they'll issue a permit to kill it. Instead they'll send up a team of their own to trap it, take it alive. Which may take time. Which may cost lives.

"You have shot animals," he says.

"Yes," she says. "I have shot animals."

The dog comes up, nuzzles Vargas's palm. He strokes its head, and it sits beside him, thumping out the seconds with its tail.

"This man," he says, "is the same as yesterday for you, no? You think he maybe deserved to die. For what he did."

"I didn't say that," she says.

"You are thinking it, though."

He bends forward, picks up his flask. Unscrewing the lid, he pours himself a cup of vodka. His hands are trembling. She can't tell if it's from the alcohol or not.

"I am lucky," he says, taking a sip, "to have this job."

"Yes."

"I did not always have it."

She waits. He cradles his cup in both hands, as if drawing warmth from it.

"Before, I was like them. You understand?" He is not looking at her, but rather at a point on the floor – as if gazing right through it to the slaughterhouse below. "I made money that way."

She leans her rifle, barrel up, against the workbench. "And the hides you confiscate," she says quietly. "Like the sable fur. You sell those on, don't you?"

In answer, he lowers his head. They sit like that for a while.

Then she says: "I don't know what you expect me to say."

"I do not know, either."

He takes a long drink from his cup. She stands up, nearly knocking her chair over backwards in the process. She's not going to be his priest, give him absolution.

"I need some sleep," she says.

As she walks away, he mutters something that stops her.

"Maybe it knows."

He is staring into his cup, which is empty.

"Maybe it does," she says.

VARGAS IS GONE. OR THAT'S WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE, WHEN she wakes up. Sam is still on the floor beside her, and the door is slightly ajar. She scrambles to her feet, startling the dog, and rushes to the window. But no – Vargas is there. Taking a piss in the snow. When he comes back in, the slam of the door startles

Sam.

"You didn't get me up," he says, rubbing his eyes. "Morning was my watch."

Vargas only grunts. His face is haggard, his eyes puffy. She knows Sam must notice that, too, but he chooses not to mention it. Working mostly in silence, they put away their sleeping bags, pack up their gear, pull on their parkas. As she gnaws on a frozen energy bar, Nicole notices Vargas staring dully at his snowshoes – like a child who's forgotten how to tie his laces. She goes over to see what the problem is.

"Idiot," she says, lowering her voice. "They're on the wrong feet."

He nods and switches them over. His movements are slow and laborious. The stink of vodka radiates from his pores, like a sickly cologne.

The temperature has risen in the night and it has stopped snowing. Now a mist hangs above the fresh snow. They don't realise how dense it is until they're standing in front of the shelter, ready to leave. Visibility is about thirty yards. Beyond that, the snow blends into the mist, the trees become shadows.

"We could wait until it clears," Sam says.

"Is fine," Vargas says. "We go."

"Isn't that risky?" she asks.

"Stay if you want, if you are scared. I go."

Vargas starts off without waiting for a reply, the dog trailing at his heels. Sam and Nicole exchange a glance. "The stubborn bastard," she says. "He's half-cut."

Sam nods. "I've never seen him like this."

They follow. It's either that or let him go. Even drunk, and exhausted, Vargas sets a good pace. Their track has been covered by the snowfall, but he manages to find it. He trudges along with his head down, bulldozing ahead. He does not watch the forest at all. Nicole does, though. She watches the mist, and the way it seems to be moving. Curling about trees, wrapping around branches. Landscape, mist and sky are all a uniform grey. It feels as if she is walking through a dream, the snow soft as cloud beneath her feet. When she looks back, the shelter is already gone – absorbed by the haze. She keeps one hand on the butt of her rifle, slung across her shoulder.

They hike. She doesn't know for how long. Two hours, maybe. Or more. Time is counted by her steps, and her breaths. An endless procession. Only the dog breaks the repetition. Like yesterday it acts as their scout, darting ahead or to the sides, before racing back to rejoin them. Sometimes it goes far enough that she loses it completely in the mist. At one point, she realises she hasn't seen it for awhile.

"Vargas..." she says.

From up ahead comes a ferocious yapping, and the dog reappears. It streaks towards them, wild-eyed, trailing trickles of urine in the snow. Its tail is straight back between its legs. Vargas shouts at it, cuffs it, then holds his palm up for them to halt.

Nicole's rifle is already in her hands, even though she can't remember reaching for it. When she moves to slide her finger on the trigger, she finds that her glove gets in the way. She shakes it off, discards it in the snow. Through her inner glove she can feel the chill of the gunstock. She is not shaking. Her hands are steady.

"We can't kill it," she says, mostly to herself.

Vargas is clumsily removing his rifle from his back. The dog crouches at his side, ears flat back on its head. The mist seems to have thickened, pressing in on them. Nicole glances one way, then the other. She sees nothing, hears nothing. They are floating in a void. In front of her, Vargas finally has his rifle ready. He turns unsteadily, looking beleaguered and bewildered. She will always remember his face in that moment. Pure terror. As if he's been struck suddenly, inexplicably blind.

"I can't see fuck all," Sam whispers.

She glances behind her; he is fiddling with his glasses, trying to de-fog them. As she turns back, she hears a whispering sound, and a section of mist seems to shift, morph, as if it's taking shape and coming alive. Then Vargas is gone. Just gone. Off to the left there is a splash of snow; kicked up by the impact of man and animal. The dog is barking insanely, Sam is shouting behind her. She raises the rifle, sights along it, and hesitates. The two figures are tangled together, thrashing around. In the flurry of white, the fury, it's difficult to tell them apart and she doesn't know what to shoot at, doesn't know what to kill. Then it rears and roars, draws back as if to attack again, and as it plunges down she fires, once, the report surprisingly quiet.

Then Sam shouts: "There!"

His rifle patters, unleashing a drum roll burst. Around the mass of flesh and fur she sees the impact of the bullets – churning up snow.

"Hold it!" she screams. "Vargas is under it!"

Sam stops firing, the echoes fading away like thunder. Then the only sound is the dog, yapping in panic. Right next to it, directly in front of her, is an empty pair of snowshoes. Vargas was snatched right out of them.

"I didn't even see it happen," Sam says.

Holding their rifles ready, they shuffle forward. A big furrow has been ploughed in the snow where the animal landed with him. As they approach, she sees it is not quite as big in length as she expected. But it is broad, especially in the haunches. Its thick hind legs are splayed out behind it, and it is slumped on its right side. In that position, lying limp and lifeless, it reminds her of a stuffed animal.

"Is it...?"

"I think so."

The fur coat is bloody, riddled with holes. There is blood, too, in the surrounding snow. Beneath it is Vargas. Both man and beast are still, as if they've fallen asleep together. A peaceful repose, of predator and prey. Nicole drops her rifle, kneels and shakes him, shouts his name. No response. But he's breathing.

It's only when she and Sam try to shift the animal off him that they see how oddly the two are interlocked. The cat's mouth is wide open – hungering for him. The barrel of Vargas's rifle is wedged sideways between the animal's jaws, and its extended cuspids are resting up against his abdomen. As far as she can tell he's not injured there. It looks as if, when it attacked, he turned his rifle sideways in defence, submitting to the animal rather than trying to kill it – which is probably what saved his life.

THE ROOM THEY'VE ASSIGNED HIM IS IN THE REAR WARD of the local clinic. It's not really a hospital, but it smells like one. When she walks in, the blinds are closed and Vargas is

sleeping. He has a neck brace on – from whiplash, apparently – and both his forearms are wrapped in bandages. Several ribs were broken, too, but other than that the damage was slight. At the sound of her footsteps, he jerks awake – tugging on the wires attached to his hairy chest, nearly pulling over the heart-rate monitor.

Then he sees her, and sighs. "Is you."

She smiles, holds her hands up like a set of claws. "Bad dreams?"

He laughs, weakly, then starts coughing. It goes on a long time and ends with him clearing his throat. He spits into a tissue, folds it up carefully, and tucks it away.

She asks, "Have you had that cough checked out?"

"Is nothing. Is fine."

She shakes her head, crosses to the window, and throws open the blinds – letting in a wash of wan light. He shields his eyes, blinking at her.

"So," he says gruffly. "You save me, Sam says."

She nods. As it turned out, it was her bullet – that first one – which killed it.

"Somebody had to. It was you or it."

He tilts his head and squints at her. "Maybe you wish you missed, huh?"

"My bosses do. I've been on the phone with them all morning."

"You are in trouble?"

"I've been temporarily relieved of my position." When he just stares at her, she's not sure if he understands, so she adds: "I've been suspended. Fired, basically."

"Is so stupid," he says. "They will save a tiger instead of me."

"It was more than a tiger."

"Is very true," he says. "So fast. So powerful." He holds up one hand, and smacks it with the other, acting out the attack in pantomime. "Like that. You saw?"

"Yes – incredible."

"And the teeth. This long!" He extends his arms. "It was – how do you call it? Sword-tooth? Like a sword-tooth?"

She laughs. "A sabre-tooth. Almost. Not quite. But similar."

"It looks at me, you know." He holds two fingers up to his eyes. "There. Like that. You understand? It sees into me. It came for me. To tell me things."

She is half-sitting on his bed, listening with a faint smile on her face. She has never seen him this giddy, this excited, and for a moment he reminds her of his son.

"What did it tell you?"

He looks down at his lap, and plucks at the sheet tucked across his abdomen. "That time – it is running out. For us, for it, for everything." He glances once at her, almost timid. "Is hard to say in English. You must learn Russian. Then I tell you."

"It's a deal."

He yawns, looking like a tiger himself. "You leave now?"

"I have a train to catch," she says.

"Go then – go back to your city. Is safer there, no?"

She reaches over to clasp his hand. He winces, and when she lets go he shakes it out – pretending like she's hurt him. "You are too strong," he says, "for a woman."

In the doorway, as she's leaving, she meets his wife and son coming in. The woman – Anya – glances at her, sniffs, and brushes by, almost as if she blames Nicole for her husband's

condition. Little Nicholas gets tugged along behind her, but he manages to look back at Nicole, raising his bad arm to wave goodbye.

Nicole lingers in the hallway to watch as they converge on Vargas. His son scrambles onto the bed; his wife wraps him up in her arms. She is scolding him and crying at the same time. He murmurs to her in their language, the tones gentle and reassuring. Before they notice her spying, Nicole turns and walks quietly away.

Out front, Sam is waiting in Vargas's truck, ready to take her to the station. He honks twice when he sees her. The dog is in its usual position on the front seat, and the radio is turned up high – blasting out scratchy Russian rock.

"You fixed his stereo," she says.

"Just a loose wire. I think he broke it on purpose."

They chuckle about that as Sam turns onto the slush-soaked highway. The temperature has gotten surprisingly mild, almost like a winter chinook back home. Sam hums along to the tunes, easing his way past a rusty, mud-spattered tractor.

"Think you'll have space for those hides?"

"Space for what hides?"

"The sable. He didn't tell you?" He jerks a thumb at the back window. She can see them stacked under the tarp. "Vargas

wanted you to have them, as evidence."

"I'll make room," she says, smiling. "What about the haul in the shed?"

"We'll need time to catalogue it. Could give us some leads in tracking down buyers and suppliers. Think your organisation would agree to send us some help?"

The dog whines and nuzzles into her lap, its tail going like a metronome.

"They might back it," she says, idly scratching its ears. "But I doubt anybody would be stupid enough to volunteer to work with you assholes. Except maybe me."

When they laugh, the dog perks up and cocks its head, as if trying to understand the joke.

Tyler Keevil grew up in Vancouver, Canada, and currently lives in Mid Wales. His short fiction has appeared in a wide range of magazines and anthologies, including our sister magazine *Black Static*, *Leading Edge*, *Neo-Opis*, *On Spec*, and *Solaris*. Parthian Books recently published his debut novel, *Fireball*, which was shortlisted for the Guardian Not-The-Booker Award, and received the Wales Book of the Year People's Prize 2011. 'Fearful Symmetry' is his second story to appear in *Interzone*, and was inspired by the work of documentary filmmaker Sasha Snow. Find out more about Tyler and his writing at www.fireballnovel.com.

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GOD OF THE GAPS

CAROLE JOHNSTONE

I'M EXPECTING IT – WELL, I'M EXPECTING **SOMETHING** – so when it actually comes I should be more prepared than I am. Instead, I almost scream out a lung and fling myself forwards, nearly knocking myself out against the lift's closed doors. Brian is shrieking too, but this concern comes far down a lengthening list that ends with possible concussion and began with the back wall of the lift being blown apart. There is much confused jostling – there were five of us in here a few seconds ago – and copious amounts of green smoke. I can't see very much (which, I'm guessing, is probably the point), but what I can see looks very much like a giant *xenomorph*: all crude spines and hissing teeth, rattling briefly around our tiny space before yanking up a screaming body and disappearing backwards into nothing.

There's a clunk – a loud one – and then the lift resumes its descent. A new hissing begins; one that dissipates the green smoke in seconds. Someone besides me is still coughing, and



Brian is still shrieking. I'm unsurprised to see that the body who went screaming out of the lift was our guide; Suse is cowering, choking in a corner, Jeff behind her. I swallow hard. "Christ, that one was a bit much."

Brian bounces over to me, mouth wide, fingers plucking at my clothes. He wasn't shrieking after all, though his high-pitched yips of excitement sound exactly the same.

"Get off! I bloody hurt myself, Brian."

He lets go of me and shuts up, though it's probably not out of obedience. I think he realises that excitable shrieks of glee probably won't do much for his chances.

My head is killing me; if I press a tender point above my left eyebrow, I can see white sparks. I hope it looks as bad as it feels. I try to catch Suse's eye, but she's still flat out on the floor. Jeff's helping her up, and probably copping a feel while he does it.

Our guide was a spotty sniffer called Vlado, and I'm not particularly sorry he's gone. After the last incident – a frenzied sprint through smoking, bass-filled corridors, chased by masked, white-haired creatures who bore more than a passing resemblance to the Wraith warriors in *Stargate* – our first guide ("Stuart, call me Stuey") had died a grisly death in a stairwell. Vlado had appeared at just such an opportune moment, whisking us away down another corridor, and then into the lift. He was twitchy from the start, and like I said, I had an inkling something else was afoot.

I lean back against the lift's doors as we go down, down. It's getting hot. Now that most of the smoke has been sucked away, I can see the remnants of the fake wall. The lift has two doors. Ingenious. Certainly more ingenious than what has gone before. Endless screaming chases and funhouse-style boos through hidden doorways and around corners.

Brian is doing a bad impression of someone who is not excited. His fingers move in and out of fists, his eyes are wide and shining. I'm feeling a bit bad about shouting at him. It's not his fault that this is my idea of hell; that ever since the bus dumped us off outside the Arches under Station Bridge and its great big silver sign, I'd resigned myself to having a terrible time. This trip has by no means been the worst – there was the Underage Festival in Kelvingrove, and a trip to Digger World that was pure, unadulterated torture – but I'm premenstrual, so it feels like it is. And that's not his fault either. The trip isn't for me anyway. It's for Brian and Jeff, and all the other twelve-year-olds running and screaming somewhere else above us. We were first in the queue. Lucky us.

Suse finally manages to get back onto her feet. Jeff has definitely been trying to cop a feel, because her face is pucely furious, and Jeff's hands are hiding behind his back. Suse has even less interest in sci-fi than I do, so perhaps for her this really is the worst trip yet. I'm about to say something to her when the lift shudders to a halt. Brian lets escape a yip of glee.

I watch the lift door rattle and then slide open onto (quelle surprise) yet another dark and smoky corridor. Cue appropriately booming drumbeats that sound a bit like the Blue Man Group with their batteries running down (yet another trip).

"C'mon, c'mon!"

I let Brian grab my hand and haul me out. I'm trying to fake enthusiasm that was pretty lame in the first place, but the bass is hurting my sore head. The corridor stretches left and right

into gloom. Without a guide, I'm not sure which way we're supposed to go, but I'm guessing that it doesn't really matter, otherwise there would be signs.

Jeff saunters out. He's a weird one. Suse told me the only productive thing that he ever does in their weekly sessions is stare at her chest. I suppose I should be grateful that Brian does actually try to read, even if it's only ever *Motorcycle Monthly* or *SuperBIKES*. Boring beyond belief, but at least he's getting the hang of words like chassis, titanium, traction-control and gyroscope. And expectation – every second word is expectation. Brian is very big on expectation.

"Which way, which way?"

I still have no idea, but he's pulling on me like he's a child. He is one, I suppose – a child I mean – but only just. Our English teacher, Mr Payne, couldn't dish any real dirt on any of the kids we were mentoring, but I know enough to realise that Brian's got it pretty rough at home. He's from the Easthill Estate, which was probably all I really needed to know at all, but Mr Payne let it slip that Brian's dad isn't on the scene and his mum might as well not be. He's on a bursary and free school dinners, wears NHS specs, looks like he and his clothes last had a clean around the turn of the century, and I'm guessing that he's chronically bullied. He's twelve years old, and has a reading age of about eight if he's lucky – maybe nine or ten if literacy was measured in ability to read aloud about superbikes. That's why I keep on letting him read those old magazines. I feel sorry for him. I feel sorry for him because no one else does.

"Which way, Miss Daisy?"

Mr Payne makes them call us that. Suse says that the way Jeff says *Miss Susie* makes her want to take a couple of hot showers. She doesn't have it that bad though. The Miss Daisy jokes got very old very fast.

We pick a direction – left – and start walking. It's like plunging into psychedelic fog. I haven't seen daylight in over an hour, and am regretting the half joint Suse and I smoked in the coach toilet on the way here. There's a sudden shrill scream, and half a dozen Greys slam up at us from behind a hidden Perspex window. Or they might be those things from that other *Stargate* – is it the Asgard? Something *Lord of the Ringsy* at any rate. One of them had a name that sounded like Haemorrhoids, I think. I only know this stuff because last year I went out with Gareth in the year above, and he's a nerd with a capital N. Cute bum though. And he's nearly eighteen.

Brian laughs like he's going to collapse, while Suse screams and Holy Christs like she's just been mugged. Even I'm beginning to get annoyed by her, although I should've expected it: she found *Scary Movie 3* scary. We stopped having Saturday DVD nights, because her dad thought it would be healthier for her to stand on a street corner drinking BO and smoking whatever.

Behind us, the lift dings closed, presumably to go back up and have its fake wall fixed before picking up the next suspecting customers. We keep going, and the smoke gets thicker, though that doesn't seem possible. I'm getting that inkling again, and so is Brian – he's holding onto my arm like it's Christmas.

Something bursts growling out of a fake wall dead ahead of us, sending us back the way we came. I can't see anything, just a lumbering shadow in swirling smoke – presumably because this *alien* is as cheap and ripped off as all the rest we've been

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The Silver Wind

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As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think, or post your comments to the forum.

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Of Dawn

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INTERZONE #238 (JAN-FEB 2012)



running away from.

Suse screams, shoves me from behind. Something skids out of a hidden corridor, collides (accidentally, I think, because over the stoned Blue Man Group, I'm sure I hear it say fuck), and then starts barrelling towards us, while we're still running towards it. Suse screams again, so does Brian, Jeff stays as creepily quiet as ever. This alien looks like a bigger version of the one in the lift. A Queen maybe, circa *Aliens*. It's pretty massive actually.

I'm beginning to feel a bit unnerved – it's dark, it's loud, I can hardly breathe for green smoke, I've already whacked my head, so health and safety clearly isn't big here, and there are two giant fake aliens charging towards us front and rear – when (quelle surprise again) a wide corridor opens up on our left.

Suse takes it first, dragging me behind her. I'm dragging Brian, but only because he hasn't let me go. The aliens cross over at the corridor's mouth, and then keep on charging in opposite directions. The music stops.

"God, I hate this!" Suse is crying, and Jeff is taking full advantage: he has one arm around her shoulder and the other around her neck in what is trying to be a headlock. He has to stand on his tiptoes to do it – and worse still, she's letting him.

"Suse, come on. The music's stopped, we're alright."

I turn back at a low growl – a low something at any rate – and Suse squeaks. There's a shadow standing at the smoky mouth of the corridor. Just standing there, looking at us. It's not moving, and I can't work out what it's supposed to be (a big person is what it looks like – a big person with very long arms). Brian finally lets go of my arm.

"Suse," I say. "They just have to get us to move before the next lot come down in the lift. Come on."

We shuffle down the corridor, where the air gets easier again. I only realise that my heart has been beating very hard when it starts going back to normal. I wasn't sure how much a tenner a head would buy us, but I've a feeling – a very glad one – that we've almost used it up. I finger the silver name badge at my breast. Its ALIEN ATTACK!!! hologram has been blinding me ever since I was made to put it on, and it's probably left a bloody big hole in my shirt. Maybe I can take it off now.

At the end of the corridor, the lack of smoke reveals black-painted breeze block walls. A giant green arrow has been felt-tipped onto lined A4, pointing left. There are bright overhead spotlights and what look like glass cases beyond it, and further than that I can make out another even bigger sign. SHOP.

"Not another exhibition," Brian says. His hands are little fists. There have been a lot of exhibitions.

"Thank fucking God," Suse mutters, and she's halfway along this new corridor before anyone can say anything else, Jeff sliding on behind.

Brian gives me his best pained expression. "Daisy – Miss Daisy – please." He's looking right instead of left, off into pretty much nothing as far as I can tell, but his eyes are shining. "Pleeease?"

Suse and Jeff are long gone, and I think that I can hear new screams as the lift starts rolling and clunking far behind us.

"Alright." Partly because I hate being told what to do and where to go. Mainly because I feel sorry enough for Brian to want to spare him a shop chock full of overpriced crap that

he can't buy, and a quicker return to a world that he probably hates. Or that hates him.

I still suspect that there's nothing up here though. The walls are bare and strip-lighted; there are no hidden Perspex windows or doorways; no smoke; no growling shadows. We walk and walk. Turn once into another corridor just the same, and then walk some more. Just as I'm about to suggest turning back, we come to a room. I'm hoping it's not a security guard's hangout – or worse, a changing room full of spotty Australians surrounded by plastic alien suits. It's neither. Instead, it's a bright, white-painted room full of display cases and stands. On the door, someone's written UFO MUSEUM in black marker pen.

"Cool!"

I don't see how a museum is any improvement on an exhibition, but Brian seems to think it is. He's through the door and pressed up against the first display case before I've had a chance to check if the coast is clear. It isn't.

"Hello."

"Hi, sorry, I'm not sure we're supposed to be here."

The guy grins at me, and then cocks it towards Brian, who's paying no attention whatsoever. The guy is tall, youngish, dressed in horrible brown trousers and a too-small white lab coat. A badge on his lapel says JOHN. He has absolutely terrible teeth – grey, crooked tombstones.

"It's alright. Most folk don't find us down here. Feel free to have a look around; there's plenty of stuff to see." He sees me checking out his horrible clothes, and shrugs with an embarrassed smile. "Just trying to look the part."

I join Brian where he's still pressed up against the first case. He's looking down at what looks like a coil of black hose. I remember the sign on the door. "Please tell me that's not what I think it is."

John grins his tombstone grin again. He points to a small card at the front of the case. RECTAL PROBE: PETER WILSON. JAN 2009. LANARKSHIRE.

"Cool!" Brian's fingers have left overawed little prints all over the glass.

"Oh fuck off."

"What?" John asks.

"Well, it's a bit big, don't you think? I mean I've seen the ones they use in the hospital – endo-whatsits – and they're about a quarter the size of that thing."

John shrugs. "It's a replica built to the specifications of Peter Wilson. He was abducted from Wishaw High Street one Christmas Eve, and didn't return until after New Year."

I scoff again, wondering if Peter Wilson's wife bought that too. "So, he described to you some rectal probe he had shoved up his arse by aliens in a UFO above Wishaw High Street, and you made it?"

John nods. "To his exact specifications." He moves us along to the next case. It's filled with all manner of what look like dildos: metal, matte and shiny; cylindrical, cone-shaped, pointed, bulb-ended. Every single one has a name, date and place carefully documented on little table cards like you get at a wedding.

"Anal probes."

I make a noise in the back of my throat that is as disgusted as it is incredulous. "As if they just stick it up there."

John shrugs, unconcerned. "They might be conductors of

some kind. Some of the abductees reported experiencing various types of stimuli."

"What the hell for? What does electrocuting someone's arse prove? And why does everything have to be so bloody big all the time?"

John shrugs again. "Are chickens stuck with anaesthetic before their throats are slit?"

I'd certainly always hoped so, though I don't see what that's got to do with anything. I remember Brian only when his nose squeaks against the glass of this new case. "Right, well, I don't think any of this is entirely appropriate." I pluck Brian free, ignoring his protests. I'm aware that I've begun sounding a bit like my mum.

"Okay," John says. He peers at Brian's name badge. "Maybe Brian would like to see some real UFOs instead."

"Yeah!"

Seeing real UFOs involves moving on to some glass-topped tables filled with fuzzy photos of what might be sky and what might be spaceships – or grey shadowy blobs – interspersed with artist impressions of flying saucers sporting more under-lighting than the average sixth-former's Ford Fiesta. Brian oohs and ahhs a little less at these, and I can hardly blame him. Once again, each photo or drawing has a name, date and place attached.

"Right, shall I tell you what I don't get – *one* of the things I don't get?" I stab at the glass. "Why do they always have to be so obvious? Why does every alien buy their ride at the same showroom, and why do they always arrive lit up like a Christmas tree, only to abduct the local drunk or hillbilly, instead of, oh I dunno, the local chess champion or whatever? 'Cause it's crap, that's why. Any alien worth their salt would at least try to disguise their arrival, and I dunno, come as a hot air balloon or something – you know, hide in plain bloody sight. Don't they do recon? Don't they ever debrief?" I'm now aware that I've begun enjoying myself.

"Look, I'm just the hired help, okay?" John hides his horrible teeth long enough to point out a dejected looking Brian. "Maybe you want to tone down the scepticism a bit."

I suddenly feel a bit guilty, and it makes me mad. "So is there anything here that isn't replica?"

"You mean besides the photos?"

"Right, yeah, apart from them." I roll my eyes – but only so John can see.

"Well, obviously there's not much. I mean, it's not as if you're going to be allowed to beam back down while you have a rectal probe hidden up your jumper."

I resist rolling my eyes again – but only just.

"I've got a question!" Brian shouts. It sounds very loud in the quiet. "Why do the aliens let them go at all?"

"What are you on about, Brian?" I think we should go now. I'm probably already in the shit.

"Well, at school right, we chop up frogs to see what's inside them, to see what's going on, like in those animal experiment labs." There are bright red circles of excitement or embarrassment (I can guess at which) high on Brian's cheeks. "And in Roswell, they cut the alien up, didn't they? To find out what was what." Brian is sneaking past the table cabinets and further into the room as if he thinks I can't see him do it. "So, my question

is why? Why don't the aliens just cut people up? Why do they let them go?"

"That's a good question, Brian. In fact, it's a brilliant one." John beams. "You're right. It stands to perfect reason that any race would seek to further their knowledge of another through a combination of dissection and controlled observation. And it leads me to what I was about to show you both. The only non-replica display in the museum."

I reluctantly follow an animated John and almost apoplectic with excitement Brian to the other side of the room. There is a vast glass cabinet, and behind it a tall gunmetal case, its doors shut. Next to this is a small coded lock. John produces a key from inside his shirt with much dramatic flourish. It's very small, and attached to a piece of string around his neck.

"There are two possible answers to your question, Brian. The first is that those abductees who get sent back are the lucky few. In other words, the rest are dissected or stuck inside the equivalent of rat cages, while they, for whatever reason, are let go. And the second, which could be just as true if not simultaneously true, is that those who are sent back *have* been dissected. Just in a way that they could never guess." He turns back and winks at me. "Too distracted by the memory of anal probes."

John pushes the key into a tiny lock at the side of the cabinet. The glass door makes a nasty grinding sound as it's slid back on runners. As he keys the code into the lock fixed to the gunmetal case he winks at Brian, who is now hopping from foot to foot as if he needs to pee. John pulls open the doors to reveal a dark interior lined with shelves. We peer in. Brian immediately stops hopping, and I can see why. There's not much in there. Despite myself, even I'm a bit disappointed.

"What's that?"

"It's a specimen pot."

"What's in it?"

John brings it very carefully out of the massive case. It looks like a tall jam jar with a plastic screw-top lid. There's a small label running around its base. I imagine something like *Strawberries. Back Garden. Jan 2010.*

"Nothing," Brian says, sounding dejected rather than cheated. "It's empty."

John shakes his head, grins his tombstone teeth. "Not empty. Come closer, Brian. Look properly"

Brian does as he's told, eager to be proved wrong. He peers in at the empty jar, eyes screwed. They blink, big and distorted through the glass, finding me on the other side of it.

"Right well, so the only non-replica thing you have in this entire museum – apart from the bloody photos – is a jam jar filled with what?" I pretend to think, and then click my fingers. "Alien air from inside an alien spaceship? No, I know: an alien's breath. Alien words!"

I've never heard such crap in my life. I'm aware that I'm spoiling things for Brian. I'm also aware that we've stumbled into a place that isn't for kids, hence the green felt-tipped arrow. Maybe this is for the evening sessions, just like the bar upstairs. Or for keeping the madman in the basement. I really don't want to get into shit (even though I think I definitely am now), because I really need the extracurricular points that mentored reading gets me. John is beginning to look pissed off with me. But, I'm sorry, this is just ridiculous. Even Brian isn't

buying it, and he *wants* to.

"Can you see anything, Brian?" John asks. "Anything at all?"

"No." Brian sounds morose. He starts fiddling with the jar's lid.

"Don't open it!" John bellows, practically snatching the jar out of Brian's hands before recovering himself. He takes a deep breath; slides his palms down those horrible brown trousers.

"Good grief," I mutter.

"Look properly, Brian. Look closer, deeper. What can you see?"

"I can see something! I can see something!"

"No, you can't, Bri." I'm no psychologist, but it doesn't take a genius to work out what's going on here.

"I can see colours – it's like a rainbow, a smoky rainbow!"

Despite myself, I look back at the jar. Nada.

"Deeper, Brian, what's behind the colours?"

Brian's breath hitches, recovers, hitches again, longer this time – long enough for me to worry whether he's suddenly forgotten how to breathe. He pushes the jam jar back towards John. His breath comes back in a fast rush. "It's dark, I don't like it." He shudders from head to toe, like a big spider's just run across his face. "I don't like it."

John carefully places the jam jar back inside the gunmetal case. He looks pleased and concerned all at the same time – though significantly more pleased than concerned. "Yes, that's not one of the better ones, sorry, Brian. We routinely alternate which one we have on display, and you got unlucky."

"How many empty jam jars do you have in your collection then?"

John cocks a mild eyebrow in my direction. "None. But we have one hundred and fifty two *specimens*."

"What *are* they?" Most of Brian's enthusiasm is back, but his face is still grey and I can see a few beads of clammy sweat on his forehead.

John beams. He takes his time closing the case and then the glass cabinet, dropping the key back inside his shirt before fixing us both with an earnestly sincere gaze. "Souls."

"Cooooo!"

"Oh please."

"Souls of people who have been sent back. Not their own souls obviously."

"Obviously."

He's ignoring me completely now, and addressing only Brian. "Other people's."

"Aliens give the people who go back other people's souls?" Brian frowns, confused. "What, as presents?"

John shrugs. "Maybe, who knows? But I doubt it. More likely as an experiment." He sighs, purses his lips. "I've been studying the idea of the *soul* ever since we were given our first specimen – this was a few years back. A young Italian guy called Alfredo was abducted from his bedroom and gone for two months. When he came back, he had someone else's soul."

"In a jam jar?" I scowl.

"In his hands," John scowls back. "And when he brought it to us, it was in a Tupperware."

I try not to laugh, but I don't try very hard.

"He believed that the aliens had taken his soul and given him someone else's to hold."

"How did he know?"

John smiles at Brian. "He saw it happen. Most people who come back remember little if anything of their experiences – and what they don't remember their mind invents. I doubt any abductor needs to memory wipe or implant false ones, because the subconscious will wipe itself clean of any and all horrors, and then make up its own shortfall with little grey men, flashing lights, tractor beams and rectal probes." He winks at me. "And who believes that old crap? If you're interested, Brian, there are some fantastic books of personal accounts in the shop."

Brian dismisses this last suggestion out of habit. "Why did he give it to you?"

John shrugs. "He didn't want it."

"Why not?"

"It wasn't his."

Brian starts gingerly poking at his own chest. He leans conspiratorially towards John. "Where does *it* live?"

"The *soul* is located behind the nose just beneath the eyes."

"God!" I'm bored rigid now. "There is no such thing as a soul – same way there's no such thing as a bloody alien! This is stupid."

John turns to look at me, and there's something in his eyes that suddenly makes me acutely aware of just how isolated we are here. No one knows where we've gone.

"What is the soul? Esoterically, it's always associated with life, and life with breath. The Latin *spiritus*, to mean breath; Greek *psyche*, to breathe or blow; the Sanskrit word *prana*, which is taken to mean the universal life force, literally means breath. If you're dead, you don't breathe. Spirit – respiratory, get it? It's got bugger all to do with that at all."

John is staring off into space now. Glancing at a still engrossed Brian, I decide it's easier just to wait this freak ride out.

"The Chinese *qi* has it, I think. Energy flow. In Islamic Sufism, there is a low, base soul and a higher soul, and humans spend their lives tempering that primitive soul, trying to achieve higher knowledge through the teachings of the Qur'an. But they too, buy into the energy idea. What happens to the soul at death? What did Sir Isaac Newton say?"

He's looking at me. It's probably quicker just to answer. "Energy doesn't disappear, it only changes form."

He grins those tombstone teeth. Seems I'm forgiven. "Exactly! Energy is transferred but never lost. Same theory applies to ghosts. Ghosts and souls. Like a magnet, right? A magnetic field can only be seen by its physical effects on other things. Otherwise it's invisible; is seen to be doing nothing at all, not even existing. Do you understand?"

I think about shaking my head, but I can't be bothered – it might invite an even longer-winded, more dizzying explanation of life, the universe and every bonkers theory in between. Brian, who I'd be willing to bet understood nothing after the behind the nose and beneath the eyes bit, is nodding furiously.

"Radiation and microwave field theory, EMF, all of that. Auras, rays, vibrations. Even dark energy: the negative energy of empty space. All of it! The soul! And when the human body dies, the base *Devil* soul is cast off to be recycled and reused, while the *Ruh* ascends." He winks at me, very pleased with himself. "Twenty-one grams."

I think about asking him if he's ever weighed his collection

of jam jars, but again, I can't be arsed. What started out as a diversion and a good deed is now growing very old very fast.

"So, to answer your long ago question, Brian, I don't think that abductors need to dissect the physical much anymore. But the soul! That's much more of a challenge. And you know, a lot of my specimens are like the one you touched, Brian. Dark, bad, not very nice. I think the abductors are dissecting the human soul. Separating good bits from bad. Getting rid of the bad souls entirely. Seeing what happens when the soul is separated from the host. Seeing what happens when that soul is sent back with someone else – someone whose own soul is no longer in residence. See? It's fascinating."

I think he's barking mad.

"God of the Gaps."

My head is hurting again. "What?"

"God is confined to the gaps in scientific knowledge and discovery. The abductors want to crush him completely. Want him gone."

"Right, well, this is fascinating stuff." I grab hold of a reluctant Brian. "But we have to get going now. The bus'll be waiting."

John looks suddenly crestfallen. "Okay, sorry, I've gone on a bit, haven't I? I tend to do that. Look, wait five minutes, I've got one last thing to show you – just one." He grins at Brian. "It's another replica, but it's a doozy. Wait till you see."

I take one look at Brian and know I can't refuse. We start walking towards the back of the room, and when John turns back to me, he's got his earnest face back on.

"You know, the incidences of soul-stealing or *soulectomies*, as I like to call them, are very well documented. I know you think I'm barking mad, but they are." He shrugs. I hate that shrug.

We come to a door. Hilariously, it is accompanied by a very *Star Trek* panel of buttons, and when John presses one, the door slides inside the wall with an even more hilarious whoosh.

"Cool!"

Inside is all white. After the dimmer fluorescents of the museum, it takes a while to adjust. The room's dimensions are relatively small, and the walls look soft, like in a padded cell. I momentarily wonder whether we've stumbled into the local loony bin, can't think why. There are no windows, and no other door that I can see, only low, white shelves and weird contraptions that look like familiar things and then don't. At the room's centre is a high, white bed. It looks like one of those toning tables you get in posh gyms.

John spreads his arms wide ahead of his masterpiece. "It's a replica interior of an experimental lab on board a UFO. Obviously, it's not quite to spec. It's an approximation of dozens of accounts, though all remarkably similar." He pats the bed's head end, where a pair of white, torsion-controlled manacles is dangling. "Want a go, Brian?"

"Yeah!"

Up he scrambles, wriggling about, prodding this and that, eyes a-goggle before stretching out, slipping his hands inside the manacles, and mock-sobbing, "Don't take my soul!", while John indulgently chuckles and winks at me like we're Brian's mum and dad.

"Right, come on now, you've had your fun." I'm not sure which of them I'm talking to, but Brian's wrists are beginning to look pretty constricted the way he's bouncing around.

To his credit, John immediately unfastens Brian and helps him down. "You want a go?"

"No, I bloody don't."

"Aw c'mon, Daisy," Brian wheedles.

"Miss Daisy," I say. God, I can't believe he made me say it.

John even takes my refusal in good humour. That shrug comes again. "Alright then, time to go."

We start walking back to the door.

"Do you want to write in the guest book?"

"No!"

"But everyone writes in the guest book," John frowns. "Just your name. You don't need to write your full address if you don't want to." He winks. "Case I'm a mad stalker." He rolls his eyes at Brian in what I'm guessing is his impression of a mad stalker. "And a few comments about what you liked and didn't like et cetera."

"Who has a guest book for a bloody museum?" But it's already been thrust under my nose, and for the sake of peace, I do it. So does Brian, but his enthusiastic comments scribbling has me almost pulling my hair out in frustration. "Come on, Brian!"

John gives me one last, long and hopeful look. "Are you sure you don't want a go?"

"C'mon, Miss Daisy, do it! It's fun!"

I can't bear refusing any longer. Not because I care much anymore about making Brian happy, but because it seems like the path of least resistance, and I'm so worried about being in the shit now it's not funny. "Fine, let's get this over with."

I stomp back to the bed, realising that my stomps make no echo. Maybe that's to do with the loony bin walls.

"D'you need a hand?"

I shake John off. His hands are cold and a bit clammy. I quickly realise that I do probably need a hand though, as the bed is ridiculously high. Halfway through an undignified clamber, I feel hands pushing at my arse. The boost gets me onto the bed, and when I turn back to have a go at John, I realise that it was Brian instead. Maybe he's been taking tips from Jeff.

The bed feels weird – not in a bad way, in fact, in quite a good way. It's soft enough to make me feel like I'm sinking, but when I look down I've barely made a dent in its surface. It's incredibly comfy. Maybe John should get out of the basement museum game and design beds for a living instead. I also feel impossibly high, as if I'm twenty feet off the ground when I know that I'm only about three. I feel like the princess and the pea. Minus the pea, obviously.

"Try the manacles, Miss Daisy!"

God. I dutifully slip my wrists through the plastic loops. Immediately they pull tight, startling me into a yelp. It doesn't hurt though; doesn't even pinch. Much.

John and Brian are looking at me like gleeful children.

"D'you like it, d'you like it?" Brian yips. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

"Yes, very cool. Can I get off now?"

John's still grinning, but it's a bit calculating now – a bit too over-excitedly expectant. My older brother used to look at me like that, right before something landed on my head, or the other one jumped out of a cupboard at me, wearing a sheet. Oh yes, I definitely have another one of those inklings, just like in the lift and in the corridor after it. Something is about to hap-

pen. Another ALIEN ATTACK!!! special. And I've volunteered to manacle myself to a replica alien bed, instead of bloody leaving while I had the chance.

"Want to see something even cooler, Brian?"

"Let me off, John. Get me out of these things!" I hear another of those *Star Trek* whooshes, and then two white bands of what look like plastic poke up from the end of the bed and curl around my ankles. This time Brian doesn't laugh – I think even for him, this is a step too far. Which scares me even more than suddenly finding myself shackled and spread-eagled in a fake experimental UFO lab, in a hidden away basement museum, in a fake alien 'adventure experience', in an old warehouse under the Station Bridge. I suddenly feel very, very claustrophobic.

John comes up alongside me. He grins his tombstone teeth. I absurdly notice that his eyes are strange. One is bright blue, the other almost black, its pupil dilated. Like David Bowie. "Not as bad as you expected, is it?"

"No, it's – it's alright. Can you let me up now though, John? Please."

He slowly, regretfully, shakes his head side to side. "Sorry, no, Miss Daisy. Soon, but not yet."

He disappears from my side, and I crane my neck around to see where's he's gone. The manacles wind deeper into my wrists as I do it. Brian is looking at me: wide, white eyes in a whiter face. John is humming to himself, moving up and down the white shelving, looking for something. I think of all those horrible contraptions and consider screaming. For a moment, I actually think I have, until I realise that it came from far away. Maybe the lift again. Any one of a dozen corridors. I close my mouth. The back of my throat is stinging and my eyes are starting to blur.

"John, what are you doing? What are you doing?" My voice sounds like someone else's; I don't recognise it at all.

He comes back. In one hand is a white coil of tubing; in the other, a jam jar. He really is barking mad. He's trying to copy the aliens. He thinks he can steal my soul. *God, this is awful.* And then I think of those eyes, those tombstone teeth. The ghastly brown trousers, the lab coat. His self-deprecating smile. "Just trying to look the part." I remember something else – something I said this time – about hiding in plain sight. And then I stop thinking altogether.

I think Brian's screaming. I think, but I don't know. My ears are rushing with peculiar noise that I know is just inside my head (this must be what terror sounds like), and I don't really care what Brian is or isn't doing anyway. *He* can still run away.

John, still wearing that hideous apologetic half-smile, starts feeding the end of tubing inside my left nostril. He's muttering under his breath: "Behind the nose and beneath the eyes."

"What are you doing?" But of course, I know. The manacles have constricted my limbs so much now that all I can do is thrash my head from side to side. John taps the sore spot on my forehead with a long finger, and I momentarily see sparks of white light. He shrugs, shrugs, shrugs.

"If you stay still, it won't hurt so much."

But it does. As I feel that tubing wind itself in further and further, deeper and deeper, it hurts like nothing on earth ever has. I can feel myself getting smaller and smaller – retreating inside another me, until all I can see is John's tombstone teeth

at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel. The pain and John's tombstone teeth are the only two things left in the world. I remember asking John why everything had to be so barbarically big. That's why.

THE BUS STINKS OF DIESEL. I GUESS THAT'S BECAUSE IT'S been idling for "Fifty bloody minutes, Daisy Miller! I'll be having words with your bloody mother and father this bloody time, mark my words." And then presumably Mr Payne recognised that that was one too many bloodies for a school bus filled with twelve-year-olds, and let me sit down.

Our arrival was greeted with much whistling. Brian got a few back slaps that he studiously ignored. He sat down next to Jeff, who studiously ignored him, arms folded in jealous fury.

Now, as we're negotiating rush hour city traffic – also my fault – Suse risks Mr Payne's wrath by leaning across the aisle to talk to me.

"What the hell happened to you two?"

I shrug. Shiver, like someone's walked over my grave.

She leans closer, dropping her voice to conspiratorial whisper. "D'you want to finish the joint in the loo?"

"No, I'm alright."

Suse blinks, frowns. "Are you?"

"Yeah. My head's still sore from where I bumped it, that's all."

I look out the window at all the cars and vans and lights. It's starting to rain; legs of moisture run down the window. It's a lie about my head. My head feels just fine. I look down at my hands. Feel one with the other, smoothing fingers over the skin and between the joints like I'm searching for something. I've no idea why. There's nothing there. Nothing different. Nothing new.

We stop, and the bus sighs and drops. Another set of traffic lights. I look out at nothing again. I feel indefinably empty, like I'm hungry, but I don't know for what.

Brian gets up on his knees and turns around to face me over his headrest. He looks like he's been crying. "Miss Daisy? My arse hurts."

I look at him while the back of Jeff's head chuckles. My lips feel numb, and for whatever reason, I'd really like to knock Brian's block off. "I should be so lucky."

Suse shoots me another of those bemused looks. And so she should. I look out at the rainy traffic. I have no idea what I mean. No idea at all.

Carole Johnstone's first published story appeared in *Black Static* #3 in early 2008. Since then she has contributed stories to many publishers, including PS Publishing, Night Shade Books, Gray Friar Press, Morrigan Books and Apex Book Company. 'Dead Loss' (*Black Static* #13) was reprinted in Ellen Datlow's *Best Horror of the Year Volume 2*, and her first novella, *Frenzy*, was published by Eternal Press/Damnation Books in 2009. She is presently at work on her second novel while seeking fame and fortune with the first. Carole also has a story in the current issue of *Black Static*, 'The Monster of Venice'. More information on the author can be found at carolejohnstone.com.

Author's note: B0 is a revolting and very cheap cider sold in Scotland. It's actually called Blue Ocean, but everyone calls it B0, as in Body Odour (definitely due to the taste!).

THOSE WHO GO MAD DO SO WHEN THE SUN rises. Gill told me this on my first day, over forty years ago now. I've been awake through the night, sat by the window, listening to my lungs wheeze and thinking about tomorrow's hearing. Now I watch dawn seep through the darkened glass. I imagine, on the horizon, rows of tiny figures going mad. What do they do, the chosen ones? They hoot and hop, lift their hands to the sky and sing worship to the red dunes. Or they lie quiet, prone, as the whistling wind covers them with sand. First the feet and hands are buried, then the torso, then the neck. Those who go mad do so when the sun rises, because in the night it is possible to hide. But in the day, this planet is a vast, barren rock.



E.J. SWIFT • THE

NINE O'CLOCK. HUM OF THE AIR CONDITIONER PUMPING air through the complex, but it's hot, always hot. My T-shirt sticks to my back. The three of them face me. On the left, the Warden, grey haired and austere. The woman, Karrow, is younger than me. She's a native. The third man I do not recognise. He must be from the Cities. They like to have an outsider at these meetings, for validation.

I sit in my chair with my hands resting on my lap, palms upward, to show that I pose no threat. The faint glow from behind is my file on the wall, backlighting me. Age: fifty-five. Height: one hundred and sixty centimetres. Lung capacity: I do not need a figure. The tightness in my chest tells me everything.

Karrow's eyes flick up and around me, scanning the information I cannot see.

"How do you feel, Yun? Physically?"

"I feel well," I say.

Karrow and the Warden exchange barely perceptible glances.

"The next ship is due this month," says the City dweller. "We expect its arrival within two weeks."

"Two weeks?" I have to suppress my dismay. "That's sooner than I expected."

"You will be allocated a bay for the return passage to Earth."

"I would like to stay here."

"Yes, we have noted your request." He frowns at me. There is a tickle in my throat and I bite down on it. I feel as though they can see the red dust lining my lungs, as though my contamination is fluorescent. I wait.

"There is no provision for ex-convicts on Botoni, Yun," says Karrow. "You are not permitted to join the New Cities."

This I know already. Nothing can be allowed to pollute the New Cities, not dust, not bad blood. I choose my next words carefully.

"I'd be content to remain in the complex and work for my board. To me it seems false economy to be preserved in abeyance for the considerable journey, when you consider the state of my general...health."

The City man frowns and it is the Warden who speaks. He is a man for whom I have a distant respect, a tolerance, I suppose.

He was young when I arrived.

"You have always been an oddity here, Yun. I remember your rages in the early days, but it was a surprise to find murder on your file."

I keep my hands soft, my eyes lowered.

"With respect, I hope you will consider my request."

AFTER MY HEARING, EVEN THOUGH THE SUN IS LETHAL AT this time of day and my head feels light and giddy, I go and stand outside. The white light strips the moisture from my lips and back. It sears through the soles of my shoes. I squint at the naked sky. I stand there until spots begin to appear in my vision. Then, I retreat inside and rest my forehead against the dark glass.

The ship is due in a fortnight. I imagine its descent, the blip in the sky slowly materialising into a silver bird. I imagine the hatch opening, the procession of silver oblongs elevated onto gravity carriers for delivery to the complex. They bring them in at night, so we cannot stare, although of course we watch from our rooms. Thus we arrived, thus we depart. We call them coffins, though they tell us we are – we were – not dead inside.

Over the months of faster-than-light travel in my silver coffin, my skin didn't sag, my muscles didn't atrophy, my heart was still. I had no brain waves. Nothing in my chemical makeup altered. But since they revived me I've wondered if, in that act of carbon freezing, the flicker of consciousness that makes me *me* underwent any change. The neuros say as your cells die and replace themselves, you're a different person from one day to the next. There's no such thing as personality, they say. But if that's true then why are we given labels? Why am I a criminal for forty years, and not merely for the day the crime was committed?

It is dangerous to be fluid. To let yourself flow. I have learned to hold myself in check.

AL FINDS ME STARING AT THE DUNES. HE'S A KID, ONLY SIX months into his sentence, ten years to donate. He was indicted for taking part in a protest.

COMPLEX

"How'd the hearing go?" he asks.

"They've booked my flight." Saying it aloud makes it real. My heart beats faster.

"Shit, man. That's come round fast."

I nod. I haven't told anyone about my request. If it is not granted, I do not want them to feel sorry for me. And I am not sure they would understand why I have asked, that I had no choice but to ask.

"I'd kill to see proper water again," says Al. "Grass. Forests. Anything but this fucking red dust."

"I don't taste it anymore," I tell him. He looks at me dubiously, as if I'm old and potentially senile, but it's true. Even the little flecks you see in your food, or as sediment at the bottom of a glass of water, I don't notice them.

"D'you think they'll make rivers out here?" Al asks.

"Not in our lifetime."

"The seas are so weird and lifeless, it freaks me out. Do they even know what's in there?"

"Only bacteria. It's too acidic for shellfish."

"You are the Oracle, aren't you. Everyone says you are."

I gesture vaguely. Up there on the horizon, is that movement? In the shimmering air, it is possible to witness false images, and speak to them too.

"I've been here a long time," I say.

"And that you don't talk much. Everyone says that too."

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?" He's right though. I don't talk much.

"And that you killed someone."

"I've been here a long time," I repeat.

"You don't look like a murderer."

I see the shadow of my face reflected in the glass and I remember Gill's terror when she was due to go back. She was right to be afraid: once our sentence is up we have no purpose, and those back on what we should call *home* have no use for us. To them we're no better than robots. In fact, our stock is worth less than a robot, because we're damaged. Gill was convinced that the silver coffins or perhaps merely their contents would be ejected into space mid-flight, and she would be left to float

for all eternity, not alive, not dead. If that's true, I told her, you'll never know the difference. But now I feel the same fear creeping over me. I don't want to go back in a box. Alive is alive and dead is dead. Frozen is something else.

IN THE EVENING I TAKE A BOOTH IN THE POD AND LISTEN again to the last letter Shu spoke me. While I listen I imagine Shu's clear eyes and tiny, intricate braids. I remember the fingers, rough skinned but dexterous, that shaped those braids. Despite the photos she has sent I still think of her this way, this young.

Shu's voice is calm and fluid.

You know of course that the family will take care of you, but I've heard disturbing reports. The people who come back are not welcome here, even on Moon. There have been attacks. It is a peculiar thing when you consider that you were sent there to be punished, but it seems to me that this behaviour stems from a kind of jealousy. Everyone wants a pass to the New World. I don't know what they imagine your life is like. I have seen videos of the complexes and even now I struggle to picture you there, where they say it is so hot that the air seems to be alive and makes you see visions, or ghosts.

We will have to keep you a secret, Yun.

By the time I get back to Earth, Shu will be over twice my age, or dead. Time dilation makes it impossible to know until I get there. And now my time is up I do not want to know. I do not want to go *home* and find a sister riddled with age or worse, a stone in the ground.

That, or else this planet has bewitched me. But is it not better to go mad than to go home, to lead at worst a reviled, at best a dwindling life, creeping about like a shadow?

IN THE WEEK FOLLOWING MY HEARING I WORK IN THE KIT-chen, although my sentence expired six months ago, and I am not required to. I do not know what I would do if I did not

labour. I don't think my fellow convicts would resent my freedom, although since Gill went I have cultivated no new friends, and perhaps I am mistaken and they would look at me jealously, even hatingly, if I spent all my hours in the Pod, lulled by Shu's voice.

My mind is skittish and I am glad of mundane tasks. Today I prepare greenhouse potatoes for the cook. They go into a stew with protein supplement. There is a rumour that in the Cities they have managed to breed livestock successfully, and that there is meat. It pleases me to believe this; that Botoni is making progress.

The cook bangs dishes around me. He is fond of banging things; it is his way of exerting authority, of making himself more than a chef for Earth's scum. As I scrape dirt from the potato skins I remember what Al said about the seas here and I think about the few occasions I ate fish, about the silvery scales crisping on a hot grill, the white flakes falling out hot and delicious and their salty tang on my tongue. I would say I miss fish, but I suppose I do not really miss it because none of these sensations can actually be recalled, except as concepts.

I wonder, if I go back, if there will still be fish.

"Chef?" I say, meek and respectful. Shu would not recognise this timid woman.

"What?"

"You could do with an extra pair of hands, couldn't you? On a more regular basis, I mean."

He snorts. "Got someone in mind to replace you? Want a soft job, do they? It's a fucking joke."

I freeze.

"What do you mean?"

"Ship's due isn't it? You'll be off in a silver box."

For a moment my old anger bubbles up and I imagine what it would feel like to stab the chef, to feel his blood in my palm. I take a knife and slice through the potatoes, making clean, exact quarters.

In the evening I serve the food I have helped to prepare in the canteen. I like doing this. It allows me to study the other inmates with the most cursory engagement, and then I can go and eat without being disturbed. But towards the end of the queue, I notice a pair of severely shaking hands. I look at the man's face and see the hallmarks of a shock-gun episode. I take his bowl myself, fill it, and hand it back to prevent the stew sloshing as best I can.

When the line has ended I go to sit next to the victim with my own dinner. His fingers are struggling to hold the spoon steady.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

His lips can barely form the words. "It's barbaric."

"I know."

"They did it to you?"

"More than once."

I remember the first time. I had dared to complain about something, the quality of the tools I was using perhaps. The foreman in my work party was on me in seconds.

"Repeat that?"

I repeated it. I was so full of rage in those days I could barely keep my mouth shut. The foreman jabbed my stomach with the shock gun and my body convulsed. When my vision cleared I

felt as though a hand had reached into my belly and scrambled everything inside me. I couldn't tell which way was up. My hands had switched places with my feet. I retched over and over, utterly disorientated.

"Get up!"

I couldn't move. I saw the gun approaching and tried to cringe away. He zapped me a second time, for longer. I was aware of all my limbs jerking frenziedly. I heard laughter and jeers. Then I lost control of my bladder and urine seeped down my trousers.

"Get up!"

Someone pulled me to my feet, pulled me along with her. A rough hand gripped my hair.

"Walk," she said. "Don't let them see you weak. Left foot. Right foot. Walk."

Gill.

She rescued me that day, and many days after. I cannot rescue this man. I am leaving in a fortnight, unless they offer me respite. The man's story shakes me. Towards the end of my sentence, with my deteriorating health, they have given me less physical labour. I have forgotten the brutality of our treatment. I have forgotten that my body is still muscular, because gravity here is greater and the effort to do any small thing correspondingly so. I feel no ownership of this body. It's as if the planet has moulded me without consultation.

Why would they let me stay? And why would I wish to?

I BECAME CONSCIOUS ON BOTONI IN A TRANSPARENT BOX, with something beeping over my head, regular and insistent. Two white-clad figures on the other side moved slowly. I took a breath, my first. My lungs were desperate for air, I couldn't inhale quickly enough. I gulped and flailed until my breathing began to settle. When they took me out of the box the doctors had to help me with my first steps, one holding each arm, unused as I was to the stronger gravity.

Before I came here I had seen images of the complex, as everyone does. They are supposed to act as a deterrent. I had seen the glinting, silver domes; I had seen the endless red dunes. I could never have imagined the heat. Or the thick, stifling air.

The impossible silence.

In general they treat us well enough, in the sense that livestock are treated well. We serve a purpose: we need to be strong and healthy, get the right vitamins and stay clean. Each day, the bell pulled me out of bed at six. A wash at the sink with cold water. Six-fifteen: dressed and tidied. Inspection at six forty-five, breakfast at seven. Desert caterpillars took us out to the worksites; we could travel between ninety to a hundred and twenty minutes each day. Under colossal, wire rigged sunshades, we took raw materials and turned them into buildings.

We went in teams, rotating projects every six months. I dug canals, riveted pipes, mixed cement, placed bricks, pumped and sprinkled water, ploughed dust, planted seedlings, hoed soil, laid rails. I did these things until my hands were blistered, my body aching as if beaten, and then they ferried us back for the evening meal, and what remained of the evening, if we could stay awake for it.

As years passed, I began to see how Botoni might, one day, be beautiful. As the old world gassed itself to death, this place

might become what Earth had been. It would take thousands of years. I was a part of it, willing or not. In the earth surrounding the complex we cultivated spindly plants from Earth seedlings. I planted a sapling. Every evening I went to water it. Year by year I watched it grow, and each day of its survival was a tiny miracle. I collected the leaves it dropped and hoarded them like jewels.

There were moments I stood on the edge of the complex and gazed deep into the desert, aware of a curious feeling in my chest: something like guardianship.

The nights here are quiet. I leave the window open. Sometimes I sit on the windowsill and look at the foreign constellations. My roommate sleeps like the dead. In the early days, the sheer weight of the things I missed would make me want to fall. I knew it wouldn't inconvenience anyone if I did. The paperwork is easy enough – failure to acclimatise, they would say. Other times I wondered what it was I did miss, and occasionally, the pan emptiness of the sky convinced me that none of it existed at all. On those nights I whispered to myself: *I must be going mad, I must have gone mad. I am not here. I am not anywhere.*

Sometimes the colonists pass by. Their vehicles glide on silver tracks that coil away into the dunes, towards other New Cities. They cannot be so far away, the Cities. When they pass we pause whatever we are doing and watch them silently. With their free, roving eyes, they are aliens.

Convicts do not run away, unless madness takes them. We are tagged of course, but that is not why. There is nowhere to run to and nowhere to hide. Violence when it comes is sudden; vicious and specific. I saw a woman twist a screwdriver in the eye socket of an eighteen-year-old boy. She got up and there was blood all over her face, on her lips, her nose. She had been a lawyer in her old life. After that they put her in a white cell. White walls, white floor and ceiling and door. Soon enough, her mind was white-washed too.

I AM NOT THE ONLY ONE GOING BACK TO EARTH. WE ARE twenty or so. A week before the ship is due, the Warden briefs us. I look around the room. The other faces reveal a spectrum of emotion from suppressed hope to genuine excitement. I have been here the longest.

The Warden clears his throat, and I wonder idly how far the dust has advanced with him. Some lucky people are immune – I say lucky, but those are the ones they take away to experiment on.

“As on the way out, you will be placed in abeyance for the duration of the journey. When you reach Earth, an officer will meet you. They will help you join your family.”

Amidst the ripple of anticipation, a lone voice calls out.

“What if we got no family? What if they're all dead?”

“Earth has a tried and tested system for briefing convict families. In the instance of the line expiring, a friend or acquaintance will have been named as your Rehabilitator. They will be alerted when the ship nears Earth.”

The man who spoke sneers but the Warden ignores him. The Warden will follow the line. He tells us that our families will help us re-enter Earth society. We will get jobs. We will pay rent. We will have free time. A couple of people nod: yes, yes!

Some look dazed. Gradually they begin to talk amongst themselves, exchanging ideas. One woman is going to learn the guitar. Another wishes to study, physics she says. Even the sneerer admits he has a plan: he is going to build his own house in Greenland.

There is one man, older like me, who stares at the wall with eyes as vacant as the dunes. He knows, I think. He knows. After the briefing I notice him around the complex. In the dinner line. In the yard. Always the same, vacant stare.

I go back to the Pod and call up an old letter – I know them all by heart. I play Shu's voice.

Today I told my daughter about you. She had a lot of questions about Auntie Yun. What does she look like? Where does she live? I said you lived in the sky. Can I go there? No, I explained. Auntie Yun will come back to us, but it might not be for a very long time.

One day I will have to tell her the truth, register her as your Rehabilitator after me, tell her to pass these instructions to her daughter and perhaps her daughter's daughter, for who knows which of us will be living when you return? It struck me, after talking to her, that it is most likely I will never see you again. Of course I have considered this before, but never with such certainty. With each year and each failed application for your early release, the odds are stacked against our reunion. Perhaps I should be glad that my children's children will have a chance to know you, Yun? It is difficult to be glad.

IN THIS LAST WEEK I AM NOT SLEEPING AND MY BREATH is more constricted than ever. One night I see a sand cloud. It rolls along the horizon, changing its shape, stretching and retracting, breath like a dragon's. It is a sign, it must be a sign. I tap my tongue to the back of my front teeth, three times. Ward it off, whatever it is. Keep it from me, keep me safe. Keep me here. There is nothing good on Earth except for Shu, and Shu will be gone. At least if I stay here, her letters will keep coming.

She was always too good for me. I was a troubled child anyway, angry at the world I had inherited, angry at the restraints and the quarantines, the adults who had created such a scale of catastrophe that they chose to pretend it was not there. Instead they peered around the mess, around Earth and up and out into the stratosphere. The planet was a toy they had broken; now they wanted a better one.

We didn't have a bad start, my mother and my sister and I, until the Depression reached Antarctica. Shu was the conscientious one. Shu took jobs outside school when our mother started imbibing and her eyes turned dull. Shu dealt with the bailiffs. She found us a one-bed flat when we lost the house.

While my sister tried to save us, I went pick-pocketing with my co-conspirator T, a childhood friend who had grown up into a reckless and beautiful young man, and the only one who had stayed loyal through the bad times. I adored him. With T, I could make squalor a game. A dangerous game, because the law was harsh and prison penalties high, but a game nonetheless. I was fifteen, and as far as I could see I had nothing to live for but the excitement of breaking the law.

I still dream about him. T and I, running down the long

white Antarctic beaches. T and I, paddling in the coral reef graveyards, collecting fish scales, shells, plastic bottles and Cocarola cans. T finding a sea horse skeleton held together by fragments of skin. When he scooped it up in his net, the bones crumbled to dust.

T and I, out on the city streets. T and I, watching for ripe targets to exit the sex clubs and the holomas. We worked as a team. Old perverts were the best. I'd distract them, rub onion in my eyes to make me cry, hike my skirt. *I'm lost*, I'd say. *I've got no money to get home*. When they put their hands between my legs, T would push the barrel of his gun into the back of their necks and they'd freeze and I'd knee their erection and take everything they had and then we ran. T kept the gun unloaded but they never knew that. T and I, criminal masterminds. T and I, doomed from day one.

The night it happened – it could have been any night, but it was a Tuesday, a dark February night. Our victim fought back, feistier than usual. T was on the floor and somehow the gun ended up in my hand. The guy was hitting T. I pointed the gun as T had shown me and pulled back the safety catch. I warned the man: *I'll shoot!* T was making awful grunting noises. I said it again. The man swivelled and kicked my legs from under me. I couldn't fire so I went for the next best thing, hitting out with the heavy barrel. When the shot exploded in my ears and the man jerked and went still I lay in shock, his blood soaking into my clothes. And I realised I had known all along. Of course the gun was loaded. Of course T would not be so stupid as to carry an empty weapon, even if he had told me otherwise.

"We just have to lie low," said T.

But I knew we would be caught. We had left too much evidence, our fear was all over the scene. That night, I went to the police station and confessed. I wrote a full statement. I felt triumphant as I signed my name: I had done something noble. Because of me, T would be safe. Even after, in the difficult bit where I was allowed visitors, Shu, and when T came, I felt the strangest calm. I knew that I was strong enough to maintain my story.

"You can do some good in the world," I told T, savouring my martyrdom, as I suppose I thought of it. "You could be something. A doctor. An astronaut."

T said he wanted to punch me. He said we should have sat tight. He said they'd send me to the convict planet. I didn't believe him.

"There's a new law. They can get people from fourteen now. Twelve if you're a boy."

I was fifteen. They gave me forty years.

T never wrote. Over the years it was Shu's letters that I came to wait for, Shu's news that I craved. I came to know the woman better than I ever knew the girl.

Back on Earth, Shu goes to university and studies law. She promises to fight for my release and I know, even then, she will never succeed but I love her for trying. I become an aunt. The baby's name is Shui, for water, but she is known as Shell. The child's father is absent; Shu lives with her boyfriend who teaches scuba diving in the summer months. Shell gets bigger. A batch of photographs: Shell's first birthday cake, Shell's first day at school, Shell touching a turtle, Shell's nose pressed behind a diving mask, Shell with eyeliner and dyed blue hair. I

gobble each titbit of news. I hug Shu's words to myself in the night, repeating them to my friend Gill in the day, happy that Shu is happy.

She speaks steadily, steadfastly. *I hope I'm not boring you*, she says once, and I speak my response immediately, even knowing my letters are unlikely to arrive until she is elderly or worse, *No, please, tell me everything*, terrified of losing even a word. Shu and Gill are all I have. Had.

Day turns into night turns into day. Now there is grey in my hair. Now my lungs are clogged and I watch sand clouds roll on the horizon and dream about those who go mad.

IN THE MORNING OVER BREAKFAST AL TELLS ME THERE HAS been a suicide. I do not need to look around to know who is missing. It is the man with the vacant stare from the briefing room.

"How did he do it?" I ask Al. I ask because Al wants to talk about it; he's distressed and curious at the same time, but I barely listen to the response. I think of how I found Gill crouched in the bathroom with a razor, days before her own ship came. I remember the scratch on her inner wrist, not deep enough to draw blood, but a precise line along the veins. I remember the horror and relief in her eyes when I snatched the razor away.

"They're going to send me into space, Yun. I'll never make it to Earth, none of us will. Not alive, not dead. I should end it now. You should let me!"

Her shoulders shook when I held her.

"You're going back to Earth," I said firmly. "And when my sentence is up, I'll find you."

"Promise me?"

"Promise."

"Because fuck knows there's nothing else for me there."

They allowed me to be with Gill when they put her to sleep. She was shaking and sweating. I knew she was terrified. The doctors must have known too. I held her hand, feeling like a traitor. I watched the needle slip under her skin. Then they took her away to freeze.

In her last years Gill had talked a lot about Earth.

"They didn't always send us back, you know. We were never meant to. I mean, would you ask a spider back into your house, even if it was all used up and looked harmless?"

"Where did we go then?"

Gill shrugged. "The New Cities. We must have worked for someone. Must have died here. But those smug cunts in their pavilions by the sea don't want us either. They were the ones chose to start shipping us back."

"I remember," I said.

"What do you remember? You're just a kid." Gill spoke with rough affection; she liked to say I'd been snatched from the cradle. But it was true. I did remember. I remembered images on the news, aged figures with ochre tinged skin disembarking from a spaceship. Placards and slogans.

Send them back! Send them back!

No room, no convicts!

Earth sent them to the moon colony. Them. Us. This, too, I remember, and Shu's letters confirm it is the case, at least in her lifetime.

They send us back because we are a civilised race. But it is

not civil, not civil at all, and Gill knew it, and this man who has ended his life today knew it. Eventually, there will be no sending back. They will work us until we die or lose our minds. And that seems, to me, not illogical. Not unkind.

THE SHIP IS LATE. I ASK THE WARDEN IF THERE HAS BEEN a decision about me. He says they will let me know when the ship arrives. At night I dream that they force me into the silver coffin, stuff a tube down my throat and turn on the gas. I start to freeze from the inside out. Everything freezes except my mind, and all I can feel is cold cold cold. Endless awareness, endless cold. I want to scream, I want to thrash but I cannot move. Then the lid comes down, and it is dark.

I wake drenched in sweat, and I bend over the edge of the bed, my chest so tight I can barely inhale, convinced I will suffocate here and now. Slowly I regain control of my lungs and the panic subsides. But I am too scared to sleep. What if they come for me in the night? What if they decide to freeze me when I am unconscious, when I cannot struggle?

A MONTH PASSES AND STILL THERE IS NO SHIP. HOPE FLUTTERS. Respite. In the kitchen, I assist the chef. At night I water my tree. I listen to Shu's letters. But it cannot last and it does not last. The day arrives. I come downstairs to breakfast and Al rushes up to me, breathless.

"Yun, the ship's coming down."

Despite the heat I feel cold. I accompany Al to the front of the complex, where a small crowd has gathered. We watch as the atmosphere shimmers, as a glint becomes a silver colossus descending from the sky.

Sweat leaks over my body like an oil slick.

Now I can see the shape of the ship, squat and round. It moves ponderously downwards, landing wings and undercarriage extending, the air turning blue as its thrusters power towards the ground. I can hear it roaring. The sound is colossal. A horrible pressure builds against my eardrums. I don't remember the landings being this loud. The air around me seems to hiss as the ship touches down. Small vehicles are driving towards it, bouncing over the uneven ground. I hear a guard shout: "Alright, get back to work!" I sense the crowd dispersing around me but my legs have become liquid and I am melting into the red dust, a part of it, taken.

I come to in the canteen, coughing up red mucus. A guard takes me back to my room. Lying on the narrow bed, I feel frail. I feel as though the planet has crept inside me, and is feasting.

NINE O'CLOCK. HUM OF THE AIR CONDITIONER PUMPING air through the complex, but it's still hot, always hot. The three of them face me.

"I'm afraid your request has been declined." The Warden raises both hands. "We put in a word for you. But protocol must be observed. We cannot make an exception."

"I'm sorry, Yun," says Karrow. She looks sorry. Maybe she even is. They know what they are sending me back to.

After my hearing I go and stand outside in the terrible heat. I peer at the scorched horizon, searching for movement there. In a few days they will put something in my veins to make me sleep. Then they will freeze me.

Back on Earth, Gill is waiting. But perhaps she has made her own life by now, and will want nothing to do with me. Perhaps she was right to be afraid, perhaps they don't take us back at all, but eject us somewhere into the deep emptiness of space. I imagine how this place might look from out there: a huge sphere marbled with pink and brown, the occasional gleam of a shallow sea. Then I imagine Earth. Small and grey, cloaked in pollution.

For the rest of the day I speak to no one.

When the lights flicker off at night and the complex falls dark and silent, I lie on my bed and close my eyes. The breathing of my roommate lengthens, regulates. Once or twice she coughs, but does not wake. I get up and slip into my outdoor clothes. In the bathroom I hack up a compound of mucus, saliva, and red dust. I fill a bottle with water.

The corridors of the complex are deserted and lit with pale blue light. I walk outside. Nobody stops me. Why would they? My actions are insanity. I don't know how far it is to the nearest New City and there will be nowhere to shelter in the blazing heat of day.

I start to walk. The air is pleasantly warm and I remove my cotton shirt to feel it brush against my arms. I walk through the cultivated earth that surrounds the complex. When the ground softens and ripples underfoot, I know I have crossed the boundary into the dunes. I keep walking. After an hour or so the ground begins to slope upward and my breath shortens. I have to stop every few minutes, bent double and panting.

At the crest of the hill I turn and look back and see the faint blue glow of the complex in the valley below. If I turned around now, I could be back in my bed before dawn and no one would know I had been gone.

There is no wind up here. There is no sound except for my own slender breathing. I sit for a minute, burying my hands in the sand, letting it trickle through and over my fingers, burying them again. One day this will be soil. It will be rich in nutrients and yield Earth-born crops and the people that eat them will never think about those who came before. I have an impulse to press myself into the ground, leave some mark or impression.

I turn away from the complex and start down the hill, slipping and sliding in the sand. The sky is enormous and full of piercingly bright stars. I am covered in stars, wreathed in them. They stay with me until the night begins to fade. The world lightens, the world is huge. Now I can see nothing but white sky and rust dunes.

I wait for the sun, anxious for a moment that it might not appear. But no – here it is, the edge of the giant star creeping over the horizon, flooding the world with crimson. A beautiful, shimmering dawn. I feel the planet's heat infuse me, its dust lining my lungs. I kick off my shoes. At the exact moment when the light touches me, I raise my hands to the dawn and I begin to dance.

E.J. Swift is a writer of science fiction and fantastical tales. 'The Complex' is her first published fiction. She has also written a novel, *Osiris*, set in a futuristic ocean metropolis whose inhabitants believe they live in the last city on Earth. *Osiris* is the first in a trilogy which will explore a world altered by climate change. You can read more about E.J.'s work on her website at www.ejswift.co.uk.

BOOK ZONE

THE KINGDOM OF GODS
N.K. Jemisin

review by Maureen Kincaid Speller

•
LEMISTRY

edited by Ra Page &
Magda Raczyńska

review by Emily Badescu

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WHITE TIGER

Kylie Chan

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DAYLIGHT ON IRON MOUNTAIN

David Wingrove

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THE COLD COMMANDS

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KAFKAESQUE

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James Patrick Kelly

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THE ISLANDERS

Christopher Priest

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MANHATTAN IN REVERSE

Peter F. Hamilton

review by Tony Lee

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IN THE LION'S MOUTH

Michael Flynn

review by Paul Kincaid

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SONGS OF THE DYING EARTH

edited by George R.R. Martin
& Gardner Dozois

review by Ian Sales

•
THE JOY OF TECHNOLOGY

Roy Gray

review by Ian Hunter



THE KINGDOM OF GODS
(BOOK 3 OF THE INHERITANCE
TRILOGY)

N.K. Jemisin

Orbit, 584pp, £7.99 pb

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**Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid
Speller**
.....

"There will be no tricks in this tale. I tell you this so that you can relax. [...] I will simply tell the tale as I lived it." And yet, given that this story is told by Sieh, the trickster god, the oldest of gods yet the one who manifests most often as a mischievous child, how can we trust his story? We can't entirely yet, as with the rest of the world, Sieh is changing, and part of the story he tells focuses on his own mysterious transformation from god to human, and his efforts to understand and maybe halt his sudden, rapid ageing.

Sieh's change began when he swore an oath of friendship with Shahar and Dekarta, the twin heirs of the ruling Arameri family, an oath which literally blew apart a section of the palace, and cast Sieh adrift from the world. When he is able to return to Sky he becomes aware of how much things have changed since the moment when the gods, including himself, were first freed. The Arameri are dwindling away, although it is not clear why, and the process is being accelerated by a series of deaths all marked by the corpses' faces being covered with masks which somehow killed them. Sieh recognises that this is in some way connected with his own situation

and sets out to discover more.

The earlier volumes of the Inheritance trilogy dealt with the freeing of the gods from the control of the Arameri, and their subsequent re-establishment in the world, and *The Kingdom of Gods* develops this further, presenting gods and godlings as more like business people, working behind the scenes, keeping the world on an even keel, but needing to earn a living too. They literally move in mysterious ways but there is something deliciously prosaic about them too: they are very practical, very 'human' gods in many ways. This is, to my mind, one of the great attractions of this series, and an element that has grown stronger with each volume. By contrast, the ruling mortal family, the Arameri struggle to cope with the diminution of their role in the world. Their power is receding, as Shahar recognises, but they connive to maintain an appearance of stability, in part because they realise that, however much they are hated, they remain the last bulwark against civil war breaking out as countries demand greater autonomy. At the same time, this situation cannot persist much longer.

If the earlier novels set the reader up to be sympathetic towards the imprisoned gods and the oppressed peoples of the world, and to react against the Arameri, this novel lays bare the complexity of the Arameri position itself, in particular, in showing how they have failed to acknowledge their own origins so determined are they to present themselves as pure and untainted. While never suggesting that their past behaviour should now be condoned, Jemisin opens the way for perhaps a little more sympathy towards them by showing how they have been undone by their own ignorance and stupidity. It is perhaps fair to say that no one in this series, not even the gods, is perfect; so much of what happens, good and bad, rests on the necessary existence of imperfection, in order to keep the story moving along, and thus this proves so in the resolution of this story.

This has been an intensely enjoyable series to read. If the first novel was a little cautious, as Jemisin's confidence in her characters has grown so has the story itself. What began as a twist on the familiar fantasy epic has developed into a penetrating analysis of the relationships between gods and humans, and the problems that arise, but also issues of power among people and countries, and who gets to wield it.



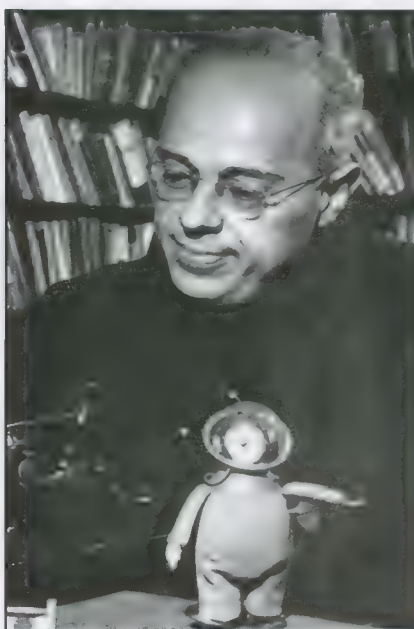
LEMISTRY: A CELEBRATION OF THE WORK OF STANISLAW LEM
 Edited by Ra Page & Magda Raczyńska

Comma Press, 292pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock

Lemistry is a celebration of the influence, vision and talent of Stanislaw Lem, a writer who wrestled with notions of consciousness, soul, simulation, identity, authenticity – and much more. Ra Page and Magda Raczyńska, stressing the notion of a multiplicity of Lems, compere a clamorous raree show of ideas, styles, experiments and entertainments. They collect three newly translated original stories; thirteen 'Reconstructed Original' stories inspired by the focus and creative approach of Lem; and four essays exploring the literary and philosophical impact of Lem's career, as well as noting his role as a catalyst for innovative thought in science and technology.

The collection opens with three stories translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones and published in English for the first time. 'The Lilo' is a darkly witty tale exploring the boundaries between 'falsified' and 'genuine' reality; 'Darkness and Mildew' is a strange tale of transformation and out of control organic evolution; and 'Invasion from Aldebaran' is a tour de force of interstellar conflict, linguistic fireworks and political satire. While none of these three have the impact of Lem's most ontologically and



epistemologically unsettling masterpieces, such as 'The Seventh Sally', 'Non Serviam' or 'The Princess Ineffabelle', all are fine tales that will excite new readers every bit as much as Lem loyalists.

For readers whose only acquaintance with Lem is *Solaris*, the novel that provided the basis for the films by Tarkovsky and Soderbergh, Andy Sawyer's essay 'Stanislaw Lem – Who's He?' provides an erudite introduction to "the least read major author of sf". It goes way beyond a mere appraisal of Lem by examining his writing in the context of a range of sf traditions – satirical, philosophical, ludic, metafictional, prophetic and visionary. Sawyer provides some fascinating insights into the author's troubled relationship with sf fans and writers and outlines his curious role in the paranoid imaginings of Philip K. Dick. A thorough, and thoroughly entertaining, piece of sf scholarship.

Mention of the relationship between Lem and Dick brings us to one of the fictional highlights of this collection, Trevor Hoyle's 'The 5-Sigma Certainty', a perfect marriage of style and theme that captures the acerbic playfulness and ontological terrorism of the Polish

master and his American soul mate cum adversary.

Toby Litt's 'The Melancholy' (previously published in *Interzone* #229) tackles a theme that frequently featured in Lem's work, the issue of integrity. Litt addresses the question of whether the identity of a system resides in its component parts, or if it has a more emergent, nebulous and holistic quality.

Lem the comedic satirist is, perhaps, best represented in 'Every Little Helps' by Frank Cottrell Boyce. Boyce's bravura piece of elliptical storytelling encapsulates the experimental ethos of the collection, as well as its fundamental sense of fun. The piece purposes to be a review of Boyce's eponymous story by Lem himself: working within a tight set of constraints Boyce produces a witty and scathing satire of consumerism driven by corporate power.

Other highlights in the 'Reconstructed Originals' section include Annie Clarkson's 'Toby', a tale that balances emotional ecology with notions of authenticity in beautifully spare and evocative prose; and Ian Watson's funny and surreal 'The Tale of Trurl and the Great TanGent', a sort of cyber-fairytale that could have descended into irksome whimsy in the hands of a less skilled storyteller.

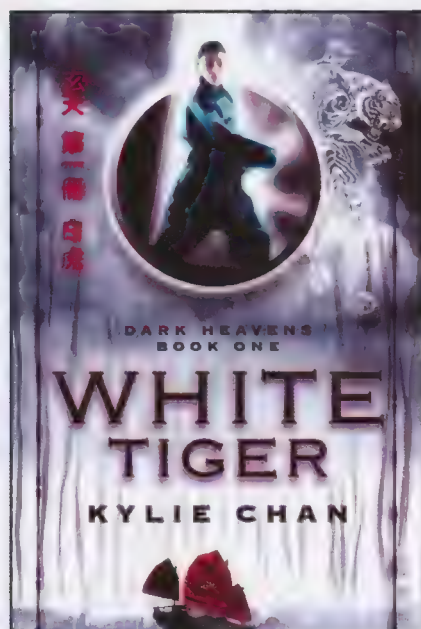
The book closes with three entertaining and thought provoking pieces mapping Lem's critical and fictional writing to cutting edge developments in nanotechnology (Dr Sarah Davies); computer science (Professor Steve Furber); and robotics (Professor Hod Lipson). These essays highlight not merely the restlessly speculative and prophetic nature of Lem's writing but its inspirational qualities. Like Lem himself, these writers demonstrate the value of work that crosses the boundary between art and science.

Page and Raczyńska have produced an unashamedly intelligent, relentlessly experimental and challenging anthology. Its combination of provocation, entertainment and migraine inducing paradoxes would be perfectly at home in Lem's finest writing.

Highly recommended.

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**WHITE TIGER****Kylie Chan**

Harper Voyager, 569pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

White Tiger is Kylie Chan's first novel. Originally published in Australia in 2006, HarperCollins has now decided to make it more widely available. It is a contemporary fantasy novel written in the first person. The protagonist, Emma Donahoe, is an Australian English teacher working at a kindergarten in Hong Kong. The novel begins with her giving up her job at the kindergarten to become the nanny of four-year-old Simone (an unnaturally well-behaved and intelligent child). Simone's father is John Chen, a wealthy and very attractive Hong Kong businessman. However, it is not long before Emma discovers that Chen is really an incognito Chinese god. To be precise, he is Xuan Wu, one of the senior deities of the Taoist pantheon. The fourth major character in the novel is Leo, an Afro-American martial arts expert and John Chen's bodyguard. Leo also happens to be stereotypically gay.

All is not well with John Chen. He is trapped in human form and seriously weakened. The demons have already killed his wife, and the king of the demons has offered a reward for his head. Of course, that makes everyone close to him a potential target so Emma finds herself on the receiving end of a crash course in martial arts and their esoteric counterparts.

There is a lot of potential in this novel.

New voices in urban fantasy are always welcome, and the use of Chinese mythology (in which the author is seemingly well-versed) makes a very welcome change from the usual rehashed Eurocentric mythologies that tend to dominate this genre. Add to that the promise of lots of martial arts action and the stage seems to be set for something really exciting.

Sadly her descriptions of the martial arts involved are surprisingly vague given their importance in the story. Strangely, for an author who has put a lot of emphasis on her knowledge of Chinese culture and mythology, Kylie Chan uses the Japanese term 'kata' when referring to the various martial art forms rather than the more authentic 'taolu'. I must confess that I was quite unimpressed by many of the fight descriptions: her numerical rating of demons and the fact that they explode into black goo when they are defeated made them seem like something out of a computer game.

But my main complaint about the novel is that it seems bloated. There is lots of action of the 'one damn thing after another' variety, but there are also various subplots that don't seem to drive the story forward at all. For example, Emma's former employer, the slightly sinister Kitty Kwok, keeps trying to contact her. And we are treated to regular conversations over lunch with her girlfriends, April and Louise, in which we hear a good deal more than we really need to about April's relationship with a minor Hong Kong gangster. Perhaps she is laying the groundwork for important events in later volumes, but if so a little more foreshadowing might have been in order.

And, after nearly 550 pages, surprisingly little seems to have been resolved. Our heroes have survived a major demonic assault; Emma seems uncannily adept at martial arts and something unspecified about her frightens the king of the demons; she has become John Chen's consort but for various reasons they must remain celibate; and, in the event of something happening to John Chen, she will become Simone's guardian.

Perhaps the lack of resolution relates to the fact that *White Tiger* is the first volume of a trilogy. Perhaps she is working on a really large scale and the loose ends and unresolved issues will all work together into a satisfactory conclusion in another 1000 pages. But I'm not sure I have the patience to wade through those pages, particularly if they involve much more girl talk over dim sum!

**DAYLIGHT ON IRON MOUNTAIN:
CHUNG KUO 2****David Wingrove**

Corvus, 368p, £14.99 pb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

The second, and final, new prequel to the original Chung Kuo series takes the survivors from the first volume and puts them in one of the white plastic megacities that now cover Eurasia. It becomes apparent that Wingrove has given us the shining cities of the future that were portrayed in early science fiction. He also gives us the true cost and the close-up grime that was rarely apparent in those old tales. The cost to humanity has been immense as the Chinese dictatorship of Tsao Ch'un has spread across the globe. Africans, Indians and their global descendants have been exterminated. This is not something that is dwelt on in this novel since the large cast has its own pressing priorities but the horror lurks in the background much like in one of those 'Hitler Victorious' alt-histories.

Another subgenre that has been mined by our author is the libertarian post-Armageddon one that is popular with certain readers in America. As is typical with these books, the USA has splintered into a multitude of warring fiefdoms. As is not typical, they are swatted aside almost contemptuously, mostly off-stage, falling to the warrior-poet General Jiang Lei. We're not in Kansas anymore.

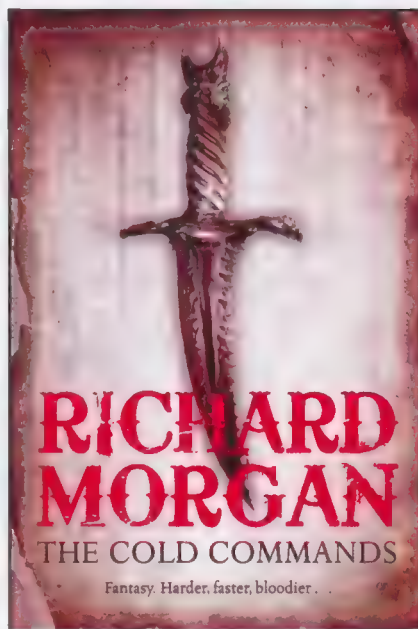
The core of *Daylight on Iron Mountain*,

like *Son of Heaven*, details the adventures of the survivors and descendants of Jake Reed's family. They struggle against bureaucracy, corruption and a rigid class system. Unfortunately the drudgery starts to make the end of this twenty-book series look a very long way off indeed, but a coup attempt starts and the stasis is mercifully shattered. Interesting times return to hook the reader.

Tsao Ch'un is a barbarian, ruling through fear and charisma. He indulges all of his appetites and whims, and he has allowed his neuroses and phobias to shape the world. The monsters of the twentieth century are more of a reference here than the tin-pot fools of the twenty-first, if only through scale. The Seven, his civilised advisors, are hampered by their innate humanity but eventually even they have to rise up against him. The war ebbs and flows, with some remarkably inventive horrors such as melting cities, but the scale of the thing sometimes seems to overwhelm the author. An army of millions can be given the same weight and attention as a regiment of three thousand. The characters are also more randomly spread about than in the first volume, but this may merely be a result of having to move them into position for the next volume, *The Middle Kingdom*.

Meanwhile, Jake Reed is caught up in an interminable court case that makes *Bleak House* look like summary justice. The Orwellian squalor that the lower classes swim in is cruelly contrasted with the luxury of the upper classes, and, as history is destroyed and rewritten, the generation gap becomes ever more poignant. At one stage Jake thinks of a King Crimson track and realises that it probably no longer exists outside of his head. The kids, for better or worse, are people of the new society.

On no account should you start *Chung Kuo* with this volume, but it is probably a good time to look at how you should collect the series if you were to entertain the prospect of tackling the series. Hardback, paperback or ebook? (It should probably be pointed out that the early chapters in the hardback edition of *Daylight on Iron Mountain* contain some strange little gaps in the typography, almost as if ellipses or something similar had been omitted.) The first volume still gives you an excellent idea of what to expect, and this volume, while flawed, will not be the one that stops you from finishing it. It's a fascinating and viable project, and we've still got the space opera sections to look forward to.



THE COLD COMMANDS

Richard Morgan

Gollancz, 408pp, £12.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

At one point, a character tells Ringil Eskiath, nominal 'hero' of *The Cold Commands*: "Men are lightweight in this world; blown about on their own ungoverned impulses like marsh-flower seed in a spring storm. Anybody can see they need anchoring. A manifest destiny, even a shared and shabby second-hand one, provides the ballast for each man and the binding for a whole people. If it's a shared lie, does it really matter?" Ringil's reply, like most, is curt: "If you carried a sword, you'd know the answer to that." And that, in the proverbial nutshell, is Morgan's interest in writing his fantasy trilogy 'A Land Fit for Heroes', of which this is the second book.

Morgan built his authorial brand with a sequence of hardboiled cyberpunk novels including *Altered Carbon*, *Broken Angels* and *Black Man*, so it seemed somewhat bizarre to some people when he deliberately turned to writing fantasy. *The Steel Remains* (2008) soon explained why he had; Morgan might have been using different tropes, but the attitude, passion and sharpness of his writing were undimmed. The result was a decidedly contemporary, character-driven adventure that successfully reworked Morgan's visceral fascination with dystopian societies in which, all too often, it's the oppressed themselves who maintain their own exploitation.

The Cold Commands is a welcome sequel for those who enjoyed the first book, yet sensibly Morgan also ensures that it's a safe harbour for new readers. But be warned: as is the way with most sequels, it is *The Steel Remains*, but turned up to 11. This is a significantly darker book than its predecessor, a more brooding, certainly more bloodthirsty tale that, like Ringil himself, takes no prisoners. It powers along at an inexorable pace, each chapter jumping us between Ringil and the trilogy's two other main characters – the half-human, half-Kiriath royal adviser Archeth, and Egar Dragonbane, former steppe nomad and a grizzly warrior with an unfortunate eye for a nobleman's wife. Yes, even with these, there are no simple black and white morals; Morgan is not a writer who ignores the ethical complexity of human nature.

Nor, to paraphrase Arthur C. Clarke's idea about magic being indistinguishable from "any sufficiently advanced science", is Morgan content to let magic simply be magic. It may go straight over the characters' heads, but readers are given the strongest evidence yet that Morgan's trilogy is actually set on a far-future Earth, many centuries after some reality-bending apocalypse that attracted the attention of numerous alien forces that had battled alongside, as well as against, humanity. This is in part thanks to the greater role played in *The Cold Commands* by the self-aware mechanical constructs called Helmsmen, artificial intelligences which formerly piloted vessels built by the long-departed, ebony-skinned Kiriath. But there are other aspects which scream SF: Ringil, for instance, spends a significant part of the novel in the 'Grey Places', some between-world quantum realm full of unrealised possibilities and alternative histories.

Although *The Cold Commands* doesn't openly advertise itself as part of a trilogy, it is nevertheless an *Empire Strikes Back* of sorts. The book may well be hooked on the main characters' involvement in the looming conflict between a decadent monarch and rebellious religious zealots (the latter being manipulated by the blue-fired, reality-shifting Dwenda, alien 'demons' intent on retaking the Earth); however, *The Cold Commands* spends a good part of its time laying the narrative foundations of events to come in the final novel. Yet this isn't simple padding, it enables Morgan – clearly at the height of his writing powers – to successfully shine more light on those aspects of human nature that are indeed the best and worst of us.



KAFKAESQUE: STORIES INSPIRED BY FRANZ KAFKA

Edited by John Kessel & James Patrick Kelly

Tachyon, 279pp, \$15.95 pb

Reviewed by John Howard

Writers arrive when their names get used as adjectives. In our field we have, for a start, Lovecraftian, Stapledonian, Wellsian – and, of course, Kafkaesque. Franz Kafka (1883–1924) died before he could have known that his name would get invoked in this way; he never completed much of his most highly regarded work, which only saw publication after his death. Kafka's life and many of the events and personalities connected with it – posthumously or not – does so often seem to be the stuff that Kafkaesque fictions are made of. His literary reputation and pervasive influence may continually metamorphose, but it now seems to have always been there.

Just how much so is shown by *Kafkaesque: Stories Inspired by Franz Kafka*. In this anthology John Kessel and James Patrick Kelly have gathered eighteen stories (including a graphic story by Robert Crumb) which they feel can merit the description 'Kafkaesque'. The book opens with an informative introduction and a chronology of Kafka's life and work. The three criteria used to define the stories' qualifications for inclusion are set forth. They had to derive from specific works by Kafka, to use him as a character, or to employ methods or materials that Kafka

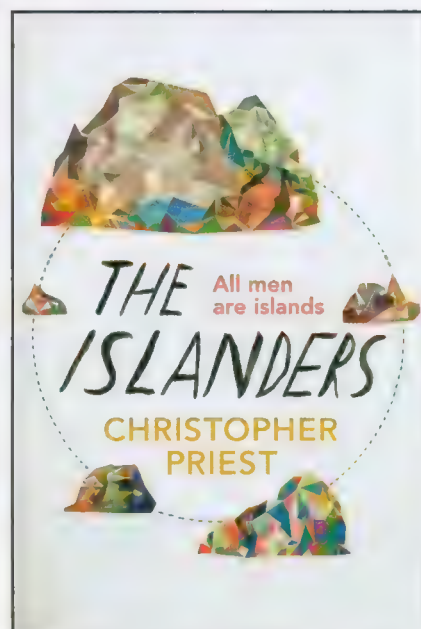
himself used. The editors' interpretation of their own deceptively simple guidelines enabled them to include a wide variety of work (all of which has been previously published) by authors both living and departed. Each story is prefaced by a note or other remarks by the author, and is followed by perceptive comments from the editors.

The oldest story here is Kafka's own 'A Hunger Artist' (1922) in a new (and previously unpublished) translation by John Kessel. A man asserts himself through inverting his desire for food, using it to practice an art. The graphic version captures the elements of voyeurism, transformation, and the confusion of the roles of human and animal in the minds of audience and performer. The most recently published story is Terry Bisson's 'The Cockroach Hat', from 2010, a short and utterly deadpan piece that could have been written by someone called archy.

In between we get stories that are well-known classics in their own right, such as 'The Drowned Giant' (1964) by J.G. Ballard. A dead man, a giant, is washed ashore on a beach; the extraordinary breaks into the mundane and devolves into the ordinary itself through the passage of time and the inevitability of familiarity and corruption. Another big name represented here is Jorge Luis Borges, with a translation of his 'The Lottery of Babylon' (first published in Spanish in 1941). And yet another big-name contributor is Philip Roth, whose "I Always Wanted You to Admire my Fasting", or, Looking at Kafka' allows Dr Kafka, who has emigrated to Newark, NJ, to further explore the perceived oppressions of love and his eventual rejection of it.

The stories come from a wide variety of sources, from individual author collections, genre reliables such as Asimov's and *Science Fiction Age*, to possibly more unlikely places as *Penthouse* and *Rogue*. These last provided T. Coraghessan Boyle's 'The Big Garage' (1981) in which a simple transaction is turned into a frightening process by a nightmarish bureaucracy, becoming a fight against the system that can never be won, and 'The Handler' (1960) by Damon Knight, a quiet and sad masterpiece of illusion and alienation.

These are just some particular highlights. As a Kafka novice I welcome the chance to be introduced to the man and his enigmatic, humorous, dark, and dream-like work – and also its legacy, which is truly a Kafkaesque one.



THE ISLANDERS Christopher Priest

Orion, 252pp, £12.99 hb

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

Now and again I have a dream in which I know exactly where I am and where I want to go, but somehow I can't find my way. Everything is different and the path can't be found. The Dream Archipelago, Priest's setting for his new, possibly slipstream, novel, is exactly such a place. The islands are subject to both temporal and physical distortions; they move, change their names, change their geography, or even disappear. Despite his world having a technology level equal to, or greater than, ours there are no reliable charts of the islands and they cannot be mapped by satellite. The result is an inherent but intriguing contradiction between the fluidity of this fantasy world and the solidity that comes with jet aircraft, the Internet, multiple television channels and smartphones!

So in his first novel for eight years Christopher Priest returns to the world of the Dream Archipelago, a world in which the encircling Midway Sea separates a large northern continent from its smaller southern polar sister. The tens of thousands of islands of the Dream Archipelago are dispersed around the Equator extending into both tropics and beyond. The nations of the northern continent are perpetually at war and the sea-lanes are always busy with troopships and supply ships, and aircraft crisscross the skies. The fighting is confined

to the uninhabited southern continent with The Dream Archipelago as neutral territory but from time to time the conflict spills over on to important islands. Also, there are combatants on the islands, stationed at treaty military bases, visiting for R&R, or as deserters.

The book starts out as a gazetteer of the islands, with an introduction by acclaimed Archipelagic author Chaster Kammeston, who also plays an important part in events (which perplexingly include his death). Each chapter in *The Islanders* is ostensibly about an island and they follow alphabetically from Aay to Yannet. Early chapters concentrate on describing the islands, but then we hear that a prominent artist was murdered at a theatre whilst performing. Overlapping, conflicting and untrustworthy narratives tell us more about the event and those involved. The police quickly arrest, convict and execute a local petty criminal of limited intelligence, but we eventually learn he was not the real perpetrator. The seemingly unconnected stories, some about writers and artists of the Archipelago (tunnelling as conceptual art!), create an incomplete, unreliable but engrossing picture of the islanders and their varied homes. The currency on most of the islands in the Dream Archipelago is the 'Archipelagian Simoleon'. Incidentally, the Simoleon is the currency of Electronic Arts' *The Sims* computer game and at least one SF story. Is Priest playing a Dickian game?

It's not necessary to have read the previous Archipelago works to enjoy this one but characters from them reappear here, including the novelist Moylita Kaine. Her book, *The Affirmation*, has the same title as Priest's 1981 novel and was also set in the Dream Archipelago, which had by then featured in several of Priest's stories. We also learn much more about a very nasty insect called the thryme, which has caused entire island groups to be evacuated and sterilised.

An earlier version of one chapter, 'The Trace', appeared in *Interzone* #214 (2008) as 'The Trace of Him' and was included in the expanded version of *The Dream Archipelago* anthology in 2009. There the two principal characters weren't identified, nor are they here, but now context gives us the answer. Priest, the author of *The Prestige*, acts here as illusionist, showing us something, and then teasing the reader into working out that something quite different really happened, in a place where reality is questionable. That makes the book extremely rewarding.



MANHATTAN IN REVERSE

Peter F. Hamilton

Macmillan, 260pp, £17.99 hb

Reviewed by Tony Lee

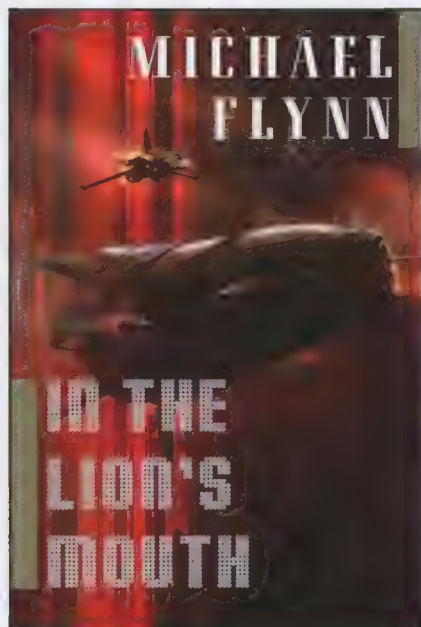
Hamilton began his career as a hardboiled-SF novelist with the action-orientated 'Greg Mandel' books about a psychic detective in a near-future Rutland (where the author was born and still lives) wracked by climate change. I must admit, I lost track of Hamilton's output after *A Second Chance at Eden*, his first collection of stories set in the Confederation timeline, but this new collection of seven stories demonstrates how much Hamilton's work has evolved since creating the *Commonwealth* saga and launching the *Void* books, making him a genre author of considerable talent.

'Watching Trees Grow' is an alternative history tale of the Roman Empire's survival beyond the present day, in an epic narrative spanning from the 19th to the 21st century. What begins as plodding detective fiction in a vaguely steampunk Oxford soon blossoms into fascinatingly optimistic futurism with deliciously anachronistic details, like flying supersonic to New York in the 1850s, colonising Ganymede in 1920, and going 8,000 light-years from Earth by the 2030s. Dynastic families run everything in this largely peaceful quasi-utopia (there's a running joke about the Borgias never leaving the Vatican), where near-immortality during centuries of imposed social stability and very rapid technological progress has resulted in a generation where

major crime is rare, and a murder case is an unspeakable outrage that must be solved, even if it takes forever. This novella is by far the longest story in this book, and arguably the most enjoyable.

Only mildly satirical, 'Footvote' is a diet-pills version of political criticism; a diatribe about citizenship responsibilities and rights available to unhappy Brits fleeing the UK via drive-through wormhole for colony planet New Suffolk. Since its 2004 publication in *Postscripts*, Hamilton has revised his engagingly witty story of catastrophic decline to include the downfall of Gordon Brown. 'If At First...' is an amusing time-travel piece about constantly rewriting history until the traveller gets it right for his own personal benefit. Written for *Nature* magazine, 'The Forever Kitten' is a punchy flash fiction of 1,000 words about biotech ethics. 'Blessed by an Angel' concerns alien procreation, policed on a Commonwealth world by Advancer Protectorate cops, exterminating the trojan 'angel' from a Higher culture. It upgrades *X-Files*/UFOlogy themes, and plays with alien abduction/*MIB* mysteries.

'The Demon Trap' is a case for interstellar investigator Paula Myo. The intrepid GM heroine from planet Huxley's Haven, her character first appeared in Hamilton's novel *Pandora's Star*, and with longevity due to rejuvenation, she links the *Commonwealth* and *Void* series. Mixing expansive space opera backgrounds with future-crime tropes, the coolly calculating Myo's detective work in this milieu ensures there's an intriguing cross-genre blend here, as a terrorist bombing on a breakaway colony world prompts Myo into devious action to capture a villain whose legal 'identity' is almost impossible to determine. The accumulation of telling details makes for interesting, if not always compelling, reading. Another Paula Myo story, 'Manhattan in Reverse', is essentially a western analogue, positing a frontier planet where rogue colonists are attempting to exploit a peculiar ability of indigenous herd animals. As in the previous story, the mystery of a distinctively science fictional crime demands an equally unique and imaginative SF resolution. There's no sense here that Hamilton is merely bolting detective plots onto a sci-fi boilerplate, because the complex radical crimes and their innovative solutions do not work outside the SF field. This, together with the intrinsic preternatural ability of formidable heroine Myo, makes for consistently entertaining and surprising fun.



IN THE LION'S MOUTH

Michael Flynn

Tor, 304pp, \$25.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

It seems that the further into the future we set our stories, the further into the past we turn for our models. Michael Flynn explicitly turns to the high middle ages as the model for this novel, though there are times when it recalls something even older, the mead halls and bards of a dark age society.

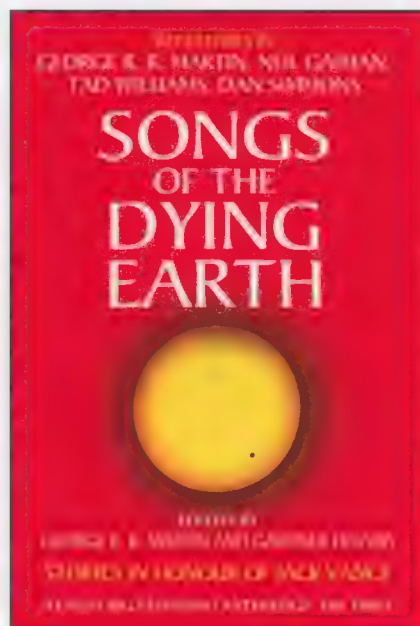
Though the latest volume in Flynn's ongoing space opera is ostensibly set so far in the future that mankind has spread across the galaxy, he kits his latter day knights out with coats of arms, courtly rules of combat, extravagant oaths, and all the other paraphernalia of someone fresh out of the fifteenth century. He even tells the story as a cross between an ancient epic and a medieval troubadour ballad, each narrative chapter beginning with a section in (pretty execrable) verse. Even when he switches to a more conventional prose, he employs the sort of grandiose language that has become associated with modern recreations of the middle ages. However, in the very first sentence of the novel, Flynn seems not to notice that nightfall and gloaming are describing the same thing, one of many instances throughout the book where it is clear that he is going by the sound of the word rather than its sense.

Whether this means that we have a faux medieval fantasy disguised as epic space

opera, or epic space opera disguised as faux medieval fantasy is beside the point: the two have become identical. The only difference between this and an archetypal Arthurian quest story is that knights ride to distant planets in spaceships rather than into darkling woods upon horseback; oh, and women play a much bigger and more active part. There are, however, still citadels, harpists, magical cloaks, tournaments and knights errant. For all I know, there are probably still poor downtrodden peasants labouring in the fields, but we don't see much of them; this is exclusively a story of the aristocracy.

Donovan burgh, who contains multiple personalities as a consequence of torture by the Confederacy, has been kidnapped by Ravn Olafsdottir, a Shadow of the Confederacy. There's a civil war brewing among the Shadows of the Confederacy, and Donovan is wanted as a figurehead by the rebels because, unbeknown to him, he was once the leader of an earlier and unsuccessful rebellion. All of this is recounted after the event by Ravn, who has brought the news to the citadel of Bridget ban, a Hound of the Ardry (the Ardry are the longtime enemies of the Confederacy), who was Donovan's lover, and to the harper, Mearana, who is Donovan's daughter. Shadows and Hounds are two names for the same thing, the military elite; the novel is crammed with terms like that (the nameless hoi polloi are called things like 'boots', 'sheep' and 'magpies'), but you get used to them readily enough. And then there are 'Those of Name', the ruling elite of the Confederacy who live in secluded luxury and have access to advanced science that is, as Arthur C. Clarke might have said, indistinguishable from magic: they play a Merlin-type role in the story.

The action proceeds by fight after fight, each more elaborate and more gory than the one before, though to be honest the rebellion seems so cack-handed from the start that it's a wonder it ever gets as far as it does. The whole novel, however, is clearly no more than a set-up for subsequent volumes, scattering a few clues and loose ends and putting the key players in place. It is action-packed, dramatic, full of incident and readable, but in the end you feel the whole thing is rather meaningless. The whole multi-volume sweep might, when finished, work thrillingly enough, but I suspect that way stations such as this volume might count as longeurs within the great frame.



SONGS OF THE DYING EARTH

Edited by George R.R. Martin & Gardner Dozois

Harper Voyager, 660pp, £8.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Few of us would disagree that Jack Vance is a man whose career deserves respect; and since imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then an anthology of stories which ape one of his creations must seem like a fine and commercial tribute.

And yet...

The Dying Earth first appeared in 1950. It is over sixty years old. The average age of the contributors to *Songs of the Dying Earth* is no younger. This anthology, then, is an exercise in nostalgia. Though its cover proclaims it contains "stories in honour of Jack Vance", it is not an homage: its contents are not inspired by Vance's creation, they pastiche it. Each of the twenty-two stories uses places and characters invented by Vance. Further, while some directly reference stories written by Vance, one, by Liz Williams, bases its plot directly on one by Vance.

The original *The Dying Earth* was a short-story collection of 176 pages. *Songs of the Dying Earth* is nearly four times larger. This means those factors which lent the original its charm soon overstay their welcome: the ornate, archaic language; the amusing names of people, places and spells; the science-fictional tone in service to fantastical magic; the constant references to the dying sun. Over 660 pages, these

conceits lend every story a similar affect, making each blend and merge into the one following. *Songs of the Dying Earth* reads like a novel without a plot and an interchangeable cast. It is, then, a book to be dipped into, not to be read from cover to cover.

While the anthology may provide a varied read only in small doses, the quality – and flavour – of the contents is equally variable. A handful stand out. Kage Baker, who appears to be the only contributor who remembered that many of Vance's Dying Earth stories were very funny. Lucius Shepard, who shows more invention than most (with footnotes), though a thorny moral discussion in the middle jars somewhat. Elizabeth Hand, whose story is the only one to feature female protagonists (she should also be rewarded for the invention of "Punctilious Trousers"). And Jeff VanderMeer, who brings a foreign, but welcome, note of the surreal; his is perhaps the least accurate imitation, but it is better for it.

However, John C. Wright and Elizabeth Moon's stories are completely tone-deaf; unlike Terry Dowling and Walter Jon Williams, who both manage to catch the flavour of Vance's originals. Neil Gaiman's story bizarrely opens in present-day Florida. Matthew Hughes, given his career to date, provides an oddly disappointing tale. Robert Silverberg's opening story is dull, as is Mike Resnick's. Liz Williams' is memorable chiefly for being so miserable. Dan Simmons provides a novella, the longest story in *Songs of the Dying Earth*. The remainder – Paula Volsky, Phyllis Eisenstein, Tad Williams, Glen Cook, Byron Tetrick, Tanith Lee, Howard Waldrop and co-editor George R.R. Martin – are somewhere in between.

Each story features an afterword in which the writer explains how they first discovered Vance's *The Dying Earth*, and what it now means to them. In almost all cases, they discovered the book at an impressionable age during the 1960s or early 1970s. These afterwords suggest that *Songs of the Dying Earth* is indeed a celebration of Vance's creation. Certainly, it seems poorly designed to introduce a new generation of readers to Vance's oeuvre – most of which is out of print anyway. And purely as an anthology, the sameness of its contents works against it.

It's hard to not suspect the writers had more fun writing the stories in *Songs of the Dying Earth* than readers will have reading them.



THE JOY OF TECHNOLOGY

Roy Gray

Pendragon Press, 24pp, £3.00 pb

Reviewed by Ian Hunter

Despite PS Publishing bucking the trend and selling their new line of short books for £4.00, it seems to be a £3.00 world. Nightjar Press, Spectral Press and even the publisher of *Unspoken Water* (that's me, folks – yes, this is an advert) all sell their wares for £3.00, so as a very small press publisher myself, stuck in the saddle-stitched world (that means 'stapled' to those not in the know), I'm very envious of Christopher Teague's ability to produce his little Pendragon perfect-bound gems for a mere £3.00.

One of the latest is *The Joy of Technology* by Roy Gray. If you attend Fantasycon and other conventions you'll know Roy as the person looking after the TTA Press table, selling copies and subscriptions of *Interzone*, *Black Static*, *Crimewave* and other titles (I call this being "Roy-ed"), but Roy also writes stories and poems and he has now delivered *The Joy of Technology* which features a very striking pink front cover by Neil Williams which has a sort of spy/glamour/retro feel to it. Once seen, never forgotten. The back cover is rather plainer, showing part of a football pitch. Sex and football; what else is there, right?

Honestly, it's not often I pick up a book and read a warning about the explicit sexual content within, so be warned: sexual acts lurk within these pages. What you



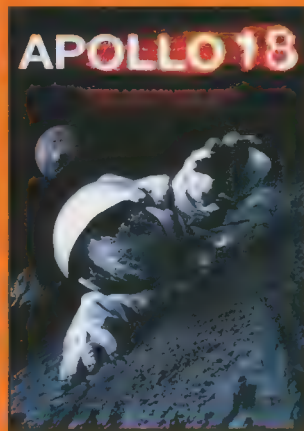
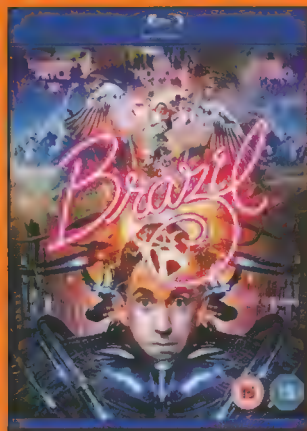
get for your three pounds is the story of young Dennis who is going abroad to Germany with his father to watch a Manchester City Champions League game (and to think that might have once

been considered fantasy). His mother and father have split up and, as it's his birthday while they are away, his father is going to ensure that this is one birthday Dennis never forgets, while the boy himself seems more concerned with playing futuristic computer games, possibly buying an illegal Diamond-Edged Buckle Knife which he has seen in the movies, but more importantly finally having the courage to chat up the teenage girl he's been too shy to approach. Before all that, and before the game, they are going to a prap club to watch a prap show, something which is causing much excitement among the coach-load of fans as these sorts of clubs are illegal in Britain.

Interlaced with the journey are some scenes between the club owner, one Arnold Klum, and a consultant, Darren Malinsky, brought in to spice the club – and the act – up at bit, or as much as Klum's budget will allow, and we get some nicely humorous scenes which come across as a soft-porn *Carry on Football*, involving football strips – or the lack of them – and a referee worth booing.

Gray teases the reader by never fully revealing the nature of the technology and the sexual act involved in the prap club until the football fans arrive and he nicely builds up the tension by hinting at a possibly horrendous accident involving the prap unit, the groin area and some sticky facial gel which creates instant stubble – you don't want any of it left on your hands when you are tinkering with wires "down there". To my mind there was also the possibility of a dreadfully embarrassing and humiliating incident between the boy and one of the dancers, happening right in front of his father and the other fans.

What happens? Well, no spoilers here, and while the ending is slightly shocking and a bit chilling – suddenly savage – it does come slightly out of left field and could have been further developed. Maybe Gray will return to the world he has created and expand on these themes in a larger format, but, all in all, *The Joy of Technology* is slick, clever, and entertaining. Read it and be "Roy-ed"!



LASER FODDER TONY LEE

BRAZIL

CAPTAIN AMERICA

APOLLO 18

CAMP HELL

FIRST SQUAD

LEGEND OF THE MILLENNIUM
DRAGON

THE SKIN I LIVE IN

ARENA

FACES IN THE CROWD

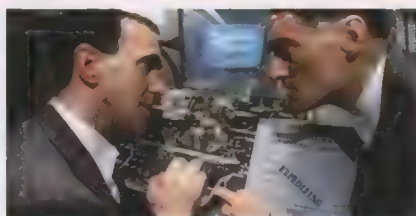
MELANCHOLIA

TOMIE: UNLIMITED

DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK

REPO MAN

THE SCIENCE OF SLEEP

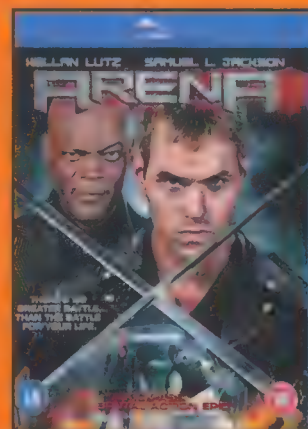


"Has anybody seen Sam Lowry?" Made in 1985, Terry Gilliam's **BRAZIL** (Blu-ray, 5 December) is a feverish – rather than fearful – satire of Orwellian dystopia where oppressive law and governmental disorder crushes everyman's hopes, wishes, and dreams alike. It's a place where technological development has stalled in paranoid un-reality of postwar fashion, with Heath Robinson devices ("You've had that scab Tuttle here, ain't ya?"), in a social malaise of terrorist bombings at Xmas. Looking sideways at futurism, it views a stagnant and inept bureaucracy using the vigorous chatter of a 'newspeak' – seemingly revised by Pythonesque scripting (where state-sanctioned torture now has the innocuously bland label of 'information retrieval') – and it's especially good at exploring a British catalogue of petty embarrassments, or very tricky situations, with a philosophical attitude that's broadly pessimistic about basic government competence, never mind leadership success in a corrupt political arena. A lament for the death of human progress it's as blackly comic as any farcical dilemmas imagined by Bradbury or Vonnegut; proposing that 'truth' will only make you worthless, not set you free.

"Have you got a 27B/6?" An innocent question that strikes mortal dread into bullying engineer Spoor (Bob Hoskins) from dept of works. Honest but naive daydreamer Sam (Jonathan Pryce, evil Mr Dark in Jack Clayton's brooding drama of

Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*) inadvertently becomes a saboteur and wanted criminal after meeting oedipal-dream girl, truck driver Jill (Kim Greist, *Manhunter*), and plots his getaway from a soulless mediocrity into romantic heroism, fighting against such irony as represented by the dismal big boss Helpmann (Peter Vaughn), who plays Santa but actually 'helps' no man. Eventually rescued from a torture chamber by militia of resistance and liberation, led by rogue plumber Tuttle (Robert De Niro, in his only successful slapstick performance), Sam flees into escapist fantasy but he falls into a Freudian/Kafkaesque nightmarish abyss and then madness...

Although the cool designer styling of *Blade Runner* lurks behind the retro look of Gilliam's picture, *Brazil* itself had a strong influence upon genre cinema, evident in everything from Mamoru Oshii's millennial *Avalon*, to *Repo! The Genetic Opera*, and Zack Snyder's grim fairytale *Sucker Punch*. ("Oh, shit!" "We're all in it together, kid.") As I've noted before in these pages, *Brazil* fits into a loose 'trilogy' of auteurist classics, sandwiched between *Time Bandits* and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (*Interzone* #216). Since the controversy surrounding its first American release, *Brazil* has acquired a devoted cult following and significant critical acclaim, and may now be viewed afresh as, perhaps, the greatest sci-fi comedy movie ever (top title previously held by Woody Allen's Hugo-winning 1973 hit, *Sleeper*). The stunning HD transfer offers Gilliam's 142-minute director's cut, but this Blu-ray lacks the wealth of bonus material available elsewhere, such as the alternative/contentious/butchered 94-minute, happy-ending/'love conquers all' version (included on Criterion's three-disc DVD edition).

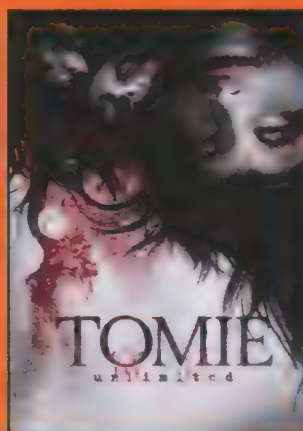


A former ILM effects artist, Joe Johnston directed the period tribute adventure movie *Rocketeer* (1991) – based on Dave Stevens' comic books about a flying hero, produced for the big screen by Walt Disney at roughly the same time as Albert Pyun's cult video *Captain America*. Pyun's movie stars Matt Salinger, with a fine supporting cast in a plot which sticks fairly closely to the comic book's familiar 'resurrection' lore about a WW2 superhero frozen in ice until he wakes up in the present day. It was the only live-action adaptation of Marvel's flag-waving icon since a pair of 1979 TV movies, which starred Reb Brown, whose 'Cap' variant is an ex-marine on bionic steroids, a shield-slinging beefcake do-gooder on a superbike (that predates *Street Hawk*!) fighting against neutron-bomb terrorism and the threat of premature ageing, also in present day scenarios but without a WW2 origin story. Now that Disney own Marvel, that mirage of

coincidence between genre contemporaries Johnston's *Rocketeer* and Pyun's *Cap* is realised in Johnston's reboot **CAPTAIN AMERICA – THE FIRST AVENGER** (Blu-ray/DVD, 5 December), adding a couple of wartime myth cues from the first *Hellboy* film and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Failing military enlistment, WW2 wimp Steve Rogers is recruited for a super-soldier programme, an experimental US effort here set against a retro background of the NYC Expo's monorail and futuristic pavilions, and the world-of-tomorrow optimism heralded by Tony Stark's dad Howard. Meanwhile, Nazi goons with "Hail Hydra!" salutes are stealing a tesseract (Marvel comics' own Cosmic Cube) of Norse legend to power their Valkyrie WMD project. Controlled by knobs and levers and dials of anachronistic techno fetishism, Johnston's film re-establishes the Cap canon, with 1940s' origin details (of 'serum infusion' and 'vita-ray saturation') writ large, via live-action photorealism, as if somehow transposed from comics panels by fantastical 3D pantograph. Is wannabe hero Rogers (Chris Evans, *F4, Losers*) a truly 'good' man with the right stuff or just a naïve fool suckered into a mere figurehead performance? Dissatisfied with playing a 'chorus girl' role model in a promo for war bonds, Rogers is perhaps at his best while trying to fend off the potentially embarrassing men-in-tights factor of costumed super-heroism. His alter-ego, the Captain, is fighting against Nazi genius/Hydra boss Schmidt, alias Red Skull (thankfully not a skrull or a red lectroid from planet 10!), played with haughty malevolence by Hugo Weaving (*The Matrix*, *V for Vendetta*), in a dark Promethean allegory of man consumed by a stolen unearthly fire. German boffin defector Erskine (Stanley Tucci) heads

a science division that's a seed for Nick Fury's SHIELD, the Rand Corp think-tank and space age DARPA styled security and espionage force that dominates much of Marvel's *Ultimates* universe. As baddies wield blue-ray disintegrator cannons, our star-spangled hero with a plan has a vibranium circular shield, often thrown with boomerang efficiency, and tactical wit: how do you break into a villain's impregnable fortress under the Alps? Attack it head-on, and get captured, of course. Filtering decades of comic book lore, all the mainstays of Captain America's patriotic exploits are here, including the perfect support of 'Dum Dum' Duggan (Neal McDonough, *Tin Man*), although lonesome Cap's love interest Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) is now a British agent, not part of the French resistance, and retcon refugee 'Bucky' Barnes (Sebastian Stan, of *Hot Tub Time Machine*, Renny Harlin's *Covenant*) is an adult version of the original Cap comic book's boy wonder sidekick. Yes, we have seen a lot of this sort of thing before – in Kerry Conran's pulpy pastiche *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004) – but here it's good to see another comic book movie which doesn't stint on providing this iconic superhero with a fully adequate showcase, despite most comics' adaptations offering merely a choice of popcorn or bubblegum entertainments, courted with gangbang romance on a slip road to nowhere. I can't help thinking how much the filmmaker's slavish devotion to tick-box details of an origin story manages to miss the point of big screen revisionism though, and seems to be pursuing the vanity of the blind and all that, with a jingoistic fervour just as ruthlessly calculating in its demographic appeal as the disfigured Red Skull's evilly overambitious misanthropy.



There were only a dozen moonwalkers on six Apollo missions, from Armstrong's first small step to Eugene Cernan's third and final drive in Apollo 17's lunar rover. **APOLLO 18** (Blu-ray/DVD, 26 December) supposes a top secret DoD flight for a 'Liberty' lunar module. This is a 'Blair Space Project' in which the American crew discover a Russian landing craft already there – abandoned on the Moon, with a lost cosmonaut's body in a seemingly haunted crater. Jittery camera work and blurry flickering imagery hinders the required build up of suspense here and it's all as wibbly-wobbly as can be in order to disguise its general lack of any low-budget innovation or SF creativity. Noisy sound effects (in the airless void) are used to impose a few jumpy scares upon viewers of this film's lifeless theatrics. There are no freaky burrowing spiders from Mars, but here we see they live inside rocks on the Moon. Really! There are blatant borrowings from the likes of *Alien*, *Event Horizon*, and *Red Planet*. The infected and expendable crewman does a boring impression of a zombie with a hammer. Like William Sachs' *Incredible Melting Man* (1977), it's terribly bad as sci-fi, and depressingly mediocre as irrational horror. Unlike Sachs' appealing cult clunker (which I always

thought owed something to Ian Watson's novel *The Martian Inca*, also 1977), *Apollo 18* has no schlock comedy to redeem it. Novice director Gonzalo López-Gallego aims low, and then undershoots.

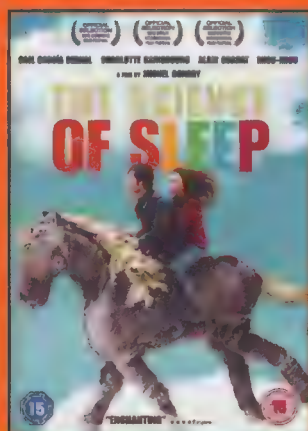
Clearly, *Apollo 18*'s most serious error is not the movie's complete absence of science fictional verisimilitude, it's the grossly impudent repetition of the night-vision effect, and its assertion that a shoddy 'expose' is actually 'found footage' edited from NASA's archives. Both the annoying blight-vision rendering and its secret history revelations could be excused in any original (gosh wow!) effect of the first use of a video gimmick in popular cinema. *[REC]* got away with it by making the bogus documentary style an asset, not a defect, but such filming trickery only works once: copycats like *Apollo 18* fail because they add nothing at all to an established formula and showcase no unique fakery. This is simply the unthinking man's variation on British TV classic *Alternative 3* (1977), and Peter Hyams' thriller *Capricorn One* (1978), with routine zombification that is stultifying, crepuscular, and utterly stale. There's no ambiguity. No surprises. It's really an insult to space movies like Ron Howard's superbly dramatised *Apollo 13* (1995), the variable – but mostly laudable – HBO series *From the Earth to the Moon* (1998), David Singleton's captivating feature *In the Shadow of the Moon* (2007), and Al Reinert's unique documentary *For All Mankind* (1989), alongside numerous other works of import for posterity if lesser cinematic prestige, all of which rightly celebrate Apollo spaceflights as humanity's greatest achievement. So, never mind this *Apollo 18* rubbish. Let's see a digitally remastered HD version of Tony Palmer's memorable *The Space Movie* (1980) on Blu-ray, please. That's long overdue!



Written and directed by producer George VanBuskirk, the feeble psychodrama **CAMP HELL** (aka *Camp Hope*) pitches its spindly tent pole of religious horrors on DVD, 26 December. Kids of devout parents are packed off to a picturesque countryside spot for compulsory bible studies and prayer meetings (and a square dance! Can they possibly cope with such excitement?).

Made in 2009, fantasy-actioner **FIRST SQUAD** (Blu-ray/DVD, 26 December) is anime about a blonde teen with 'amazing psychic powers' who's 'trained as an assassin'. Just the usual manga derivative stuff, then, aimed at teen fans of Japanese cartoons? Well, yes and no. This is actually a coproduction by Russia, Japan, and Canada, and so it benefits from wider cultural inputs than typical anime material. It also has a curious but charming mix of media and filmic influences. On the eastern front of WW2, one little clairvoyant girl has visions of grisly death. Circus orphan Nadya is now a Soviet secret agent and a heroine opposing Germany's onslaught. While mad Nazis summon occult forces to assist in their campaign against Russia in winter, there's a machine that can send Nadya across dimensions into a land of the dead, which serves here as a *Matrix* analogue: necro-space instead of cyberspace with, amusingly, a cinema screen as one portal/interface. Can Nadya recover from amnesia and manage to predict the pivotal 'moment of truth' leading

WIN!



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Tony reviews many more Blu-ray and DVD releases in our sister magazine *Black Static*, published in alternate months to *Interzone*.

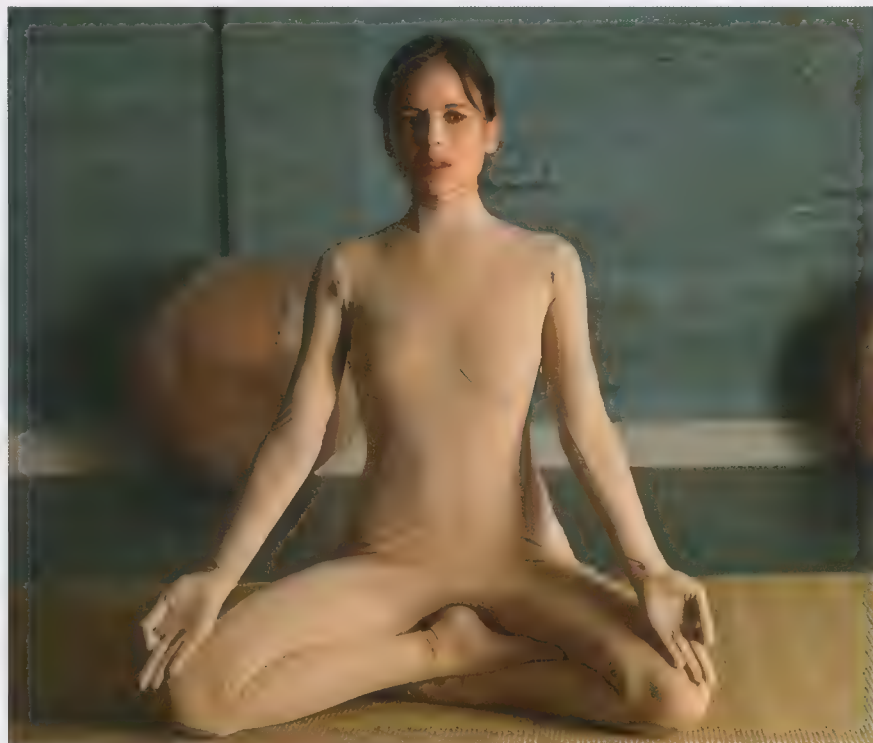
In the sing-along delusion of vacuous dogma, and much oppressively catholic spirituality, pious beliefs of evangelical adults and a weaselly guru are inflicted upon sheltered and impressionable youth, in what amounts to a callously determined case of distressing 'blame games' and 'child abuse'. Imagination is cruelly stigmatised as corruption, and impure thoughts not tolerated as the youngsters suffer heightened indoctrination that results in social and cultural 'zombification' for Jesus. Genre veteran Bruce Davison is on good form as a chief slimy preacher but he's given too much to do here, sermonising through lengthy torrents of brainwashing dialogue, and even his thespian

professionalism cannot salvage anything worthwhile from this crucially overlong and badly paced mess. Disturbed boy Tommy (Will Denton, clearly struggling in his first major role) is a trouble magnet when 'satanic' forces manifest in teenage-sex rebellion which prompts a family crisis. Based on a true story of another American case of apparently 'demonic possession', *Camp Hell* lives up to its title only because it's hellishly boring and essentially derivative as a nonchalantly TV movie styled unsuitable tragedy of perplexed teens and attempted suicides. Dana Delany (who also played Denton's mother in TV series *Kidnapped*, 2006-7) and Andrew McCarthy fail to deliver us from the evils

of hand-wringing support performances as poor Tommy's wholly incompetent parents. Jesse Eisenberg (a Hollywood superstar-in-waiting if *Zombieland* and Fincher's *The Social Network* are anything to judge his future by) has a standout extended cameo as a former victim of zealotry, seemingly incarcerated for his diabolical sins of simply wanting a secular life. As a warning about the threats to modern youth that are fostered by the closed mindsets of 'covenant communities', *Camp Hell* is largely banal. As a frustrated adolescent/coming-of-age story it is slightly more successful, but paradoxical genre spectres haunt Tommy's daydreams, and they weaken the film's mainstream authenticity.

to victory in battlefield action? Behind enemy lines, Nadya is hunted by a female pair of killers. There are lots of sudden deaths which supposed psychic Nadya fails to foresee. She has a samurai blade against assault rifles or tanks, and several action scenes tend to reach a climax with slo-mo visuals very reminiscent of *Matrix* bullet-time. "Some like it hot," says the punk girl with a flamethrower on a snowy battlefield. *First Squad* is just never as much fun as *Blood: The Last Vampire*. There's an odd mix of art styles, with some realistic drawings looking like rotoscoped archive footage, while the main work featuring Nadya and her ghost team has typical anime fashions and thankfully is without the 'big eyes' curse. The main problem with this release is that the film is only 60 minutes, and there are no extras on the disc. It's a film that might repay a second viewing, and the HD transfer is excellent, but anime fans could still feel a bit ripped off. Why couldn't this movie have been bundled with a couple of other new short features?

"Don't worry. We're not going to eat you." Hirotugu Kawasaki's anime film **LEGEND OF THE MILLENNIUM DRAGON** (Blu-ray/DVD, 26 December) concerns an accident prone schoolboy named Jun who's targeted by a demon. Jun reaches a sanctuary in a temple but is transported back in ancient history to an imperial Japan that's troubled by samurais and magicians battling 'wandering oni' beasties, which turn out to be yet another human clan in a conflict against darker forces. Jun's birthmark confirms his noble ancestry, and he's considered a saviour, and instructed how to control a magic dragon called Orochi. After giant spidery creatures attack a temple community, Jun's newfound chum and appointed mentor Raiko turns evil, apparently possessed. Teamed with a conservationist leader's feisty granddaughter, Mizuha, Jun embarks on a quest for truth and justice, blah, blah... Sometimes superb animation, enlivened by colourful visuals for magic effects and monsterama scenes, cannot elevate this material from an ordinary replay of many familiar anime themes. A traditional Asian serpentine design for Orochi, the water dragon that eventually awakens multiple ultimately destructive elemental forces, also fails to impress, and it's never once as much fun as cheapo CGI photo-real animations of Korean spectacular *Dragon Wars* (aka *D-War*, 2007). This is similar in its basic plotline to Shyamalan's fascinating fantasy/unintentional farce *The Last Airbender*, and the manga sourced *Legend of the Millennium Dragon* has an assortment of generic tropes, which also mirror Cameron's *Avatar*. Of course, the moral dilemma of what to do about Orochi's power, and whose side to take in the clan disagreements, reflects upon Jun's present day problems with playground bullies, so a standard time-travel/teen geek fairytale aspect is obviously front-loaded here, and the film's coming-of-age melodramas, as a confused Jun struggles against prospects of imminent war while promoting a pacifist agenda in a fire-versus-water showdown, are presented without any storytelling panache or much respect for the intelligence of even adolescent viewers.



In the 1970s, satirical comedy *Myra Breckinridge* drew a majority of hostile criticism for its rape scene in unacceptably bad taste, especially with Raquel Welch starring as the product of the scenario's sex-change op. Since then, body-swap movies along gender lines, such as Blake Edwards' reincarnation rom-com *Switch* (1991) and British TV series *Boy Meets Girl* (2009), have succeeded only in spoofing mainstream attempts to legitimise transsexual stories. Pedro Almodóvar's borderline SF **THE SKIN I LIVE IN** (DVD/Blu-ray, 26 December) reflects on the director's own bizarrely witty drama

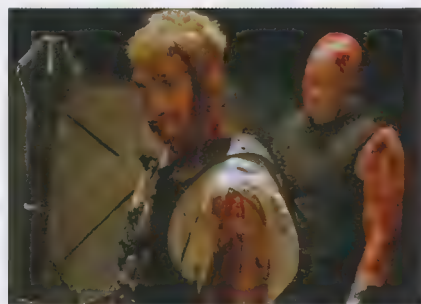
Kika (1993), with fascistic identity theft and sketchy biotech issues flayed from John Woo's actioner *Face/Off*. A plastic surgeon, Dr Ledgard (Antonio Banderas), is driven to disastrously perverse fixations by his own family's double tragedy. Seeking revenge for the rape of his phobic daughter, Ledgard kidnaps the rapist and works for years to change him into 'Vera' (Elena Anaya, *Hierro*), who at one point in the transformation wears a post-op appliance that is reminiscent of the mask in Georges Franju's classic *Eyes Without A Face* (1960).

Thankfully, a great deal more than merely the sum of its genre antecedents

and visionary influences, Almodóvar's latest and probably greatest film is a coldly and darkly poetic modern fairytale about the crowdedly symbolic mess of psychosexual tension in a tomorrow's world where abnormality is a starkly defined ordinariness. Identity and sexuality themes are shuffled by overheated lust, repressed grief, and villainous complicity. Vera, wearing a medical body stocking ("like a second skin") for house arrest under constant surveillance, is raped by Ledgard's brother in a carnival tiger costume, and the doomed brother's animal suit adds some heavyweight surrealistic menace to cold Moreau allusions. Beautiful Vera is persistently eroticised, whether naked or covered. Banderas' Ledgard quietly matches the melancholic desire of Dr Phibes, pining for his lost beloved, but Ledgard's recreation of his dead wife Gal is a subtly different pursuit, bereft of any campy exuberance, and just as intense as De Palma's brooding Hitchcock tribute *Obsession* (*Black Static* #24).

While the narrative houses prominent flashbacks, concealing its major twists and characters' motivations, there's precious little sense here that Almodóvar is trying anything radical in the sci-fi mode. However, the story's lack of emotional impact actually strengthens this movie's appeal. There's a chilling quality here which approximates Cronenberg, and that's very much to the credit of a strong cast and a fully matured, seriously artistic director who seems to have long since given up making delightfully colourful and broadminded yet simplistically kitsch and comedically frothy Spanish romps.

Bravo!



Gamer meets *Gladiator* in visual effects artist Jonah Loop's directorial debut **ARENA** (Blu-ray/DVD, 9 January). Illegal death matches are presented as Internet live snuff for the entertainment of overly excitable viewers and online gamblers worldwide. The alleged hero David (Kellan

Lutz, one of the *Twilight* Cullens) is lured into an obvious trap by seductress Milla (Katia Winter), kidnapped to be kept as fighting slave 'Death Dealer' for criminal mastermind Logan (Samuel Jackson, shamelessly and recklessly undiscerning in what jobs he takes nowadays). Dismal and perfunctory performances of laughably inept scripting (including official signifier of vacuity: "Why are you doing this?") sketch out an uninventive over-stylised mishmash of comic book allusions and fight club mayhem which is mostly just blithely irritating (there's even a dentist's drill among one supposedly unnerving barrage of sound effects!). With blatant fanboy refs to genre works – from *Silence of the Lambs* (Hannibal's mask) to a

famous line from *Cool Hand Luke* – this is a terribly uninteresting collage of clichés where everything's fetishised: from a grungy Mexican hovel to the super-villain's glossy secret lair where decorative Asian girls are techie minions. Appallingly trite, and lacking any surprises, this is a hyperreal and empty spectacle with shallow sensibilities exemplified by a timidly digressive mid-runtime montage of successful kills. It has all the emotional depth of a greasy stain, and the moral complexity of a Disney cartoon, with a final twist that is unpredictable but utterly without consequence because we just don't care about such pathetic attempts at characterisation, or the overacting/wooden hero's predicament.



Nearly a decade since his debut feature – lively comic book adventure *Bloody Mallory* – Julien Magnat is back with average suspenser **FACES IN THE CROWD** (Blu-ray/DVD, 9 January). Schoolteacher Anna (Milla Jovovich) is witness to a street murder. She is thrown off a bridge by the serial killer, and wakes up unable to recognise or distinguish faces, including her own. So, when everyone's a stranger, her life falls apart in a flurry of mistaken identities. Despite front-page

celebrity as 'the girl who got away', Anna is a wrecked psyche, prone to nightmares of trauma, and awkwardly embarrassing days mired in a complete loss of social competency (she is suspended from work for being unsafe with any class full of 'unknown' kids). Belligerent cop Sam (Julian McMahon) is unhelpful at first, so we can easily predict he will become a hero. Anna's new shrink (Marianne Faithfull) explains, somewhat fatuously, that "faces are the barcodes of the human race".

In a big city of streetwise anonymity or domestic isolation, surrounded by a mass of potential stalkers, it's no surprise when Anna's dilemma gets worse after she is dumped by her charmless boyfriend: "Was it me you were seeing when we had sex?" Soon, lost in a strobe-lit nightclub, Anna's best friend is another victim of the unidentifiable throat-slasher, but then Magnat's storyline promptly settles down into a routine crime drama.

Although shot in Canada, this is a quite proficient Hollywood style production and offers the novelty of more different actors and extras all playing the same few roles than any other movie I can remember! Sadly, and ironically, it's a rather nondescript damsel-in-distress urban thriller with a shamelessly contrived doppelganger shootout and chase sequence finale. This film lacks many of the weird horror scenes which distinguished *Agnosia* (*Black Static* #23), *Blink*, *The Eye* series, and suchlike obviously genre works, not to mention David Lynch's better character-switching brand of volte-face eeriness. However, the premise about 'prosopagnosia' (face blindness) is fairly intriguing, and there are a few minor but quirky frissons of otherness that Magnat directs inventively, his efforts greatly enhanced by witty CGI confusions of unrecognition, with some razor-sharp editing.



I am not a big fan of Lars von Trier's work. I did not care for the stark b&w of postwar drama *Europa* (1991), with its crashing symbolism and politicised sensibilities. I gave up watching TV mini-series *The Kingdom* (1994) after a half hour of (for me!) rather painful tedium. *The Idiots* (1998) was another reject, basically because I despised the pointlessly restrictive Dogme formula. I shudder at any thought of a musical starring Björk, so *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) was happily ignored after seeing a few minutes of it on TV. I did not have a reason for avoiding *Dogville* (2003), except for a healthy disrespect for Nicole Kidman, whose acting career since Kubrick's failure *Eyes Wide Shut* has been mostly disappointing, and later wrecked by remakes. Despite all of the controversy, *Antichrist* (2009) proved to be a truly gruelling or insipidly pretentious waste of time, but still I entertained hopes that von Trier's latest, **MELANCHOLIA** (Blu-ray/DVD, 23 January), would be far better. And, thankfully, it is, despite a downbeat title!

On a bad hair day, ad copywriter Justine (Kirsten Dunst, *Spider-Man* trilogy)

contemplates the end of everything in a prologue of slo-mo symbolism (marriage: the 'beginning of the end' for ambitiously creative life?) and some exquisite visual poetry. A two-part narrative of human apocalypse, this presents a variation of *When Worlds Collide* (1951) disaster movie, and the crushing isolation depicted by Geoff Murphy's classic *The Quiet Earth* (1985). Smiling but lying bride Justine staggers through her manic depression, after the unhappy couple arrive two hours late for their wedding's lavish reception. Obviously, being a von Trier film, it's going to be one of those "enjoy it while it lasts" days. A magnificent supporting cast (including John Hurt and Charlotte Rampling as Justine's bitterly divorced parents; Alexander Skarsgård as Justine's risible employer; Udo Kier as the wedding planner; and Kiefer Sutherland, never quite managing to shake off the burden of TV hero Jack Bauer), all make scenes that spoil everybody's fun, each getting a chance to shine here, although the main gloomy plot revolves around Justine's mood swings. The groom claims he's the luckiest man on Earth (viewed, in retrospect, as harsh irony). With a 'top table' coterie all choking on pretence, embarrassments, and frustration, there's nothing much worse than any family squabbles at a high-pressure social occasion.

The second and final chapter is about Justine's anxious sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg, *Antichrist*, *The Science of*

Sleep, and David Bailey's *Intruder*), who crumples during the film's climactic act of star-gazing mixed with navel-gazing conundrums in von Trier's lazily spectacular art house version of Alex Proyas' *Knowing*. There is a widescreen pay-off and grand interplanetary scale CGI to match the stellar doomsday scenario. Sometimes the film has cinematography that's astoundingly good, but at other times the handheld visuals seem rather amateurish. Sometimes the upper-middle-class soap musings are just so excruciatingly dull it becomes fascinating; almost mesmerising in its existentialism if likened to Tarkovsky's weak-force genre dramas (*The Sacrifice*), or a philosophically atheist 'judgement day' invented by Haneke. "Life is only on Earth; and not for long." In common with Malick's awkwardly uncanny *The Tree of Life*, this is not a Spielbergian Hollywood saga of broken marriages, dysfunctional families, and sibling rivalry. Only distant rumblings of SF maintain a fair degree of interest for depictions of characters' mortal dilemmas. The brooding/frantic irrational behaviour affects both Justine and Claire, but the chalk 'n' cheese sisters find solace (now measured in quanta?) in each other's strengths before mutually grim contentment, accepting their fatal conclusion.

We have 2 Blu-rays to give away. Use MELANCHOLIA as your subject line.



TOMIE: UNLIMITED (DVD/Blu-ray, 23 January) is the ninth film in a series (which I have not seen) based on a manga by Junji Ito, who also created the comic book source of Higuchinsky's bizarre comedy-horror *Uzumaki*. Since the first film, *Tomie* (1999), several actresses have played the lead role of unkillable schoolgirl Tomie

in this odd franchise. *Tomie: Unlimited* begins with Tomie (Miu Nakamura) impaled by a falling metal crossbar in a comedic crucifixion homage to *The Omen* (1976). On what would have been her 18th birthday, inexplicably resurrected Tomie returns home in a witchy strop, much to the consternation of her parents and her younger sister Tsukiko (Moe Arai) who evinces a compelling portrait of tormented grief and survivor's guilt. Arrogant and cruel, Tomie has scars (from her fatal accident), which have a life of their own to make a house of hell for her family. When she grows bored of domestic post-mortem dysfunction, she gets ready to leave but her crazy dad listens to the voice in his head, and he stabs Tomie, hacking her body into pieces. Never mind, Tomie just reappears at school in guise of a 'new girl'; and multiplies, bringing taunts and terror whenever she pops up – including a judo club, where she defeats Toshio, her sister's prospective boyfriend. French kissing with twisted/knotted tongues like a Cronenberg version of penis envy; Tomie's talking, taunting, laughing severed head hovers over a waste bin; plus tons of

other low-budget splatter with assorted subgenre influences and copycat imagery! Tsukiko's photos reveal Tomie's evil nature, which soon spreads like a viral rash of giant pimple 'tumour faces' perched upon shoulders of the damned. "You cut off the human head, you idiot!" Maniacal killers and drone victims; gruesome comedy and rubbery monster makeup effects; a CGI blood-ghost emerges like *Hellraiser* from one slashed up corpse. Another schoolgirl victim runs around headless, while giggling hysterically.

When all sanity is gone and it gets too weirdly intense, Tsukiko wakes up from the dream to yet another warped reality. Like a *Society* with demonic possession or a hostile takeover by mutant flesh, *Tomie: Unlimited* is perversely funny and oddly poetic in its variously barmy or surrealist visuals (including hairy 'human centipedes' made of clone-heads!) of 'body snatcher' invasion and gorily supernatural absorption mayhem. Don't take my word for it, though, find your own interpretation – there are many provocative and fantastical ideas presented here to choose from.



Weak horror fantasy **DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK** (Blu-ray/DVD, 20 February) is the feature debut of director Troy Nixey, a former comic book artist. Little sulky Sally (Bailee Madison) moves into an old house, ominously called Fallen

Mill, that is being restored by her dad Alex (Guy Pearce), who certainly won't win any father of the year awards – not, at least, until long after this movie's climactic/inevitable reconciliation with his practically estranged daughter – because he's preoccupied with his work and new girlfriend Kim (Katie Holmes, *Disturbing Behaviour*, *Batman Begins*), who is a bit unhappy over an unexpected 'stepmother' role. The seemingly 'haunted' house is a spooky place with a hidden cellar, used as the hideaway for gnome critters like junior gremlins with temperaments of otherworldly rats. The hideous creatures' hobbies are lurking and whispering and scampering about. Their diet, apparently for immortality, is...children's teeth. Are they really 'tooth fairies' of folklore? They are scared of light. They are were-Lilliputians with violent tendencies, and Sally is lured into their trap.

This dark fairytale, written and co-produced by Guillermo del Toro, is clearly patterned after the genre maven's own *Pan's Labyrinth*, but its big-name cast wrecks its appeal. Born in the UK, but raised in Australia, Guy Pearce remains a terribly variable actor. He was okay in Curtis Hanson's crime story *L.A. Confidential*, not too bad in Antonia Bird's period horror

Ravenous, very good in Christopher Nolan's mystery *Memento*, and watchable in caper *The Hard Word*, but Pearce is pretty awful in John Hillcoat's weirdly pretentious western *The Proposition*, and almost single-handedly (Samantha Mumba was no help) ruined Simon Wells' *Time Machine* remake. I wonder how good or bad Pearce will be in Ridley Scott's return to sci-fi, the forthcoming *Alien* prequel *Prometheus*? Perhaps we could blame Pearce's early TV career, where stints on those dreadful Aussie soaps, like *Neighbours*, might well have stunted his development as a performer, and jinxed any burgeoning talent.

Although this hairy creep-fest descends into predictable formula, lurching from one screaming fit and traumatic attack to the next, its slow revelations about the shadowy realm behind vents and grates, or under blankets and dinner tables, is well orchestrated in terms of narrative pace. So detailed and stylishly produced, it's a great looking picture and Nixey demonstrates a keen eye for visual impact, but it entertains only fitfully. It is the relationship problems, solved by two-out-of-three surviving the finale's supernatural trauma together, which spoils everything with pathetic TV soap grade acting, from Pearce and Holmes in particular.



Eureka's masters of cinema collection shifts into cross-genre top gear with the Blu-ray edition of **REPO MAN** (20 February). Alex Cox's cult film dates from 1984, but hardly seems dated at all. Its conceptually satirical sense of humour and quirky eccentricities were far ahead their time a quarter of a century ago, and so this unique movie's genre jibes plug into our current quasi-dystopian era perfectly.

Otto (Emilio Estevez in his career defining brat-pack role as a "white suburban punk") is newly unemployed, and just desperate enough to accept a casual job repossessing cars. Now he starts "getting into tense situations". There's a loony scientist driving about town in an old Chevrolet Malibu, with something lethal in the boot: is it nuclear waste or toxic remains of dead aliens? Everyone wants this car: L.A. cops, CIA spooks, UFO geeks, violent hoodlums, a sponging televangelist...and the repo men ("Not just

a job, it's an adventure"), social outsiders whose caustic opinions are strong enough to etch titanium.

It borrows some of its cine-literate images from the likes of *Kiss Me Deadly*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Timerider*. Iggy Pop provides a memorable theme song: "I'm looking for the joke with a microscope". A product placement/sponsorship deal is exploited as a running gag. The 'mythic figure' of Miller (Tracey Walter, always good but never better than this) is the chosen one who's allowed to fly the glowing car during the unexpected finale. The car now represents our unattainable dreams. It's like the mothership from Spielberg's *CE3K*, and/or the final cosmic 'Stargate' in Kubrick's *2001*. "The more you drive, the less intelligent you are." It's a buddy movie, a chase thriller, a crime mystery, a gang rumble, a teen romance, a sci-fi conspiracy, an offbeat comedy, political commentary, and so much more, switching tone and cinema style every few minutes "as life roars by you in a blur". With so much wacky originality on show, you might well reasonably expect this film to be a jumbled mess, but all these different thematic facets shine, and debutant director Cox makes it all work faultlessly as everything fits neatly into place, and the assorted weirdness

seems appropriate. On a hospital PA system: "Mr Lee. Mr Lee. Please return the scalpel. Mr Lee."

There is a 97-minute TV version (supervised by Cox, adding a few different scenes), which attained a cult reputation of its own for aficionados. That nifty alternative cut is included here too, alongside supplementary featurettes such as *Repossessed* (2005), with Cox & Co reminiscing and discussing the film's chequered origins. Cox's pandering to devotees continues with discussion of deleted/outtakes scenes. *Harry Zen Stanton* is an interview/video mini-biog about ultimate repo man, Harry Dean Stanton – this film's greatest acting asset, delivering stream of consciousness philosophy beamed direct from the noosphere. *Repo Man* on hi-def is a must-buy movie, whether or not you can afford the credit repayments. Shame about that dully minimalist cover artwork though! What's wrong with the original poster?

This movie has nothing whatsoever to do with Miguel Sapochnik's tepid sci-fi horror *Repo Men* (2010), but see also Alex Cox's sequel *Repo Chick* (2009)!

We have 3 Blu-rays to give away. Use REPO MAN as your subject line.

BACKLIST



Michel Gondry's whimsical rom-com **THE SCIENCE OF SLEEP** (2006) is also a fantasy of lively Jungian tropes, which begins with the bright idea of a paint-splatter version of Trumbull's famed 'Stargate' sequence for Kubrick's *2001*. Lonely weirdo Stéphane (Gael García Bernal, who co-starred with Pitt and Blanchett in *Babel*, and is probably the only actor to portray both Che Guevara and Elvis Presley) desperately wants to be a graphic designer with a properly fulfilling creative job, but winds up making boring calendars in a rather dull office. Like Billy Liar, Stéphane invents a dreamscape world

so he can escape from mundane reality; but Stéphane's level of creativity means a no-budget arts and crafts realm, with cut 'n' paste inventions and stop-motion animation for a blue-screen universe.

Arriving in Paris, Stéphane falls instantly in love with new neighbour, charming Stéphanie (Charlotte Gainsbourg, Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre*), who is available but seemingly distant. That's not the main problem, though. The problem is that, like Henry Spencer in *Eraserhead*, the often befuddled Stéphane can't always be sure when he's awake. Philosophical asides engender Stéphane's flights of miraculous imagination, which may seem cute but sinister at the same time. Inventor Stéphane is into painting, sculpting, composing, and 'writing' (or perhaps wittering on reads as a more accurate description?). He has built a one-second time machine. Stéphanie is seen operating a bizarre typewriter and knitting machine combo. Stuffed toys come to life, while various cardboard props – in a 'TV studio' and on location settings – grant a beguiling handmade quality to many scenes that's not unlike the quaintness of

a life-size puppet theatre. The frequently cited 'Blue Peter' appeal' of the set designs hardly does justice to sundry visions (of "Anarchy in the cellophane!") on concerted display here. Stéphane's retreat into, and occupation of, an infantile make-believe worldview hampers his vaguely adult life and further compromises his already erratic pursuit of Stéphanie.

Although the film boasts much that is winsome and colourful, and is often childish, there are several irksomely piggish/bad-taste gags cutting into later scenes, which boldly roll back Stéphane's endearing oddness as engaging 'protagonist', so we must re-evaluate his apparent eccentricity. Is his odd behaviour actually like that of a stalker? Does the closing scene of a fairytale elopement in a dreamland really signify something much darker? *The Science of Sleep* has a predetermined ambiguity which is surprisingly effective overall, and just as occasionally disquieting (although never as genuinely disturbing as the cinematic weirdness in David Lynch's oeuvre) as it is consistently amusing. There's nothing here to make you snooze. I rest my case.

MUTANT POPCORN

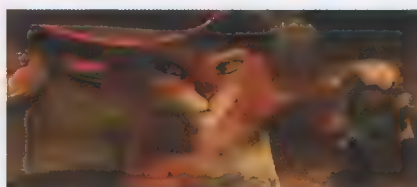
NICK LOWE

HUGO

•
PUSS IN BOOTS•
ANOTHER EARTH•
THE FUTURE•
THE AWAKENING•
THE THING•
ARTHUR CHRISTMAS•
BREAKING DAWN PART 1•
IMMORTALS

A century and a decade ago, science fiction cinema had its very first signature image when the moon took a rocket to the eye in Georges Méliès' *Voyage dans la lune*. That shot is now the nucleus of Martin Scorsese's exquisitely infuriating **HUGO**, which projects a fantasy history of the invention of cinema from Brian Selznick's book *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* – a 500-page novella inflated to doorstep size by acres of white space and protracted experimental detours into wordless graphic fiction. Selznick's thin but tangled narrative, about an orphan secretly maintaining the clocks in the Gare de Montmartre whose quest for the secret of a broken clockwork automaton leads

to the rediscovery of cinema's formative genius, is revealed at the end to be itself the product of a Hugo-built automaton. This has a certain aptness, given that the assignment of pumping it up to cinematic scale has fallen to Scorsese's *Aviator* writer John Logan, a man who owes his Oscar to having been deservedly sacked from *Gladiator*, and whose achievements in sf film have been the remake of *The Time Machine* and the franchise-killer *Star Trek: Nemesis*. Scorsese's film is quite stunningly designed and directed, and rummages through the possibilities of live-action 3D with an inventiveness and enthusiasm not seen since, um, *Resident Evil: Afterlife*; and the relationship between boy magician



Hugo's story is intriguingly mirrored in *Shrek* spinoff **PUSS IN BOOTS**, which struts its stuff with a lighter step for having rid itself of the dead weight of *Shrek*, Fiona, and Donkey, as Antonio Banderas' digitally neutered tom buckles up his swash to apply the series' signature fairytale/Mother Goose postmodern mashup technique to the suddenly voguish beanstalk mythos in heaven-smashing 3D. Alongside the beanstalk business with its Goosezilla climax, an origin story for Puss is folded into a romance with Salma Hayek's bad-kitty adventuress and a festering bad bromance with childhood buddy turned nemesis Humpty Alexander Dumpty. When the antagonists are introduced as fearsome hillwalking veterans Jack and Jill, it looks as if the plot is going to be based

around an ingenious fusion of this Jack with that, which one imagines must have been the idea at one point somewhere down the long dark road of development. It's therefore rather a letdown when the original beanstalking Jack turns up in a later cameo, having inexplicably changed his name to "Andy". But the heart of the story is two orphans, an egg gone bad, and another quest to reconnect a greatly fallen visionary with the soaring inventions of his youth ("I know the real Humpty, the inventor, the dreamer. Whatever happened to that guy?") and give an outcast hero a home. The dance routines outstay their welcome despite a terrific Rodrigo y Gabriela soundtrack, and the stuff at the end about golden insides and an egg heaven on top of the beanstalk is a notch stranger than anything you were braced to expect. But if the franchise's stock of unexploited nursery material is getting a bit thin, *Puss* remains a formidable comic creation; and for all his bravado ("Fear me if you dare!") we can see that canary he's brought as a gift for mama isn't really dead.

Hugo and the forgotten figure of Papa Georges has clearly appealed to Scorsese as a mirror of his own role in the rediscovery of Michael Powell. But though Logan has done what he can to fill Selznick's story out with character arcs and subplots constructed around supporting figures like Sacha Baron Cohen's very strangely played Station Inspector, the film ultimately stands or falls on whether it can persuade its audience to be moved by the history of early cinema.

Unfortunately, anyone already so persuaded is likely to have a fairly tooth-grinding experience. "We thought it would never end," says Logan's Georges of his early career: "But then the war came, and youth and hope were at an end. The returning soldiers coming home had seen too much reality. They were bored with my films." This is such wilfully shoddy film history that one seriously wonders how it could have been allowed to stand in a film that's supposed to be celebrating the forgotten truths of pioneer film history. Anyone who cares anything about Méliès – which one would like to think includes Selznick, Scorsese, and Logan – knows that he stopped making films in 1912, and that what put him out of business was the American market, first through uncontrolled piracy of his international hits (especially *Voyage* itself), and then

through Thomas Edison's ruthless gangster cartelisation of the nascent film industry through the Motion Picture Company, which wasn't ruled illegal till 1915, by which time it had destroyed Méliès' career without any help at all from the Kaiser. If anything the war saved him from his creditors, by allowing him to cling on to his studio estate in Montreuil till 1923. Book and film also invent a film historian to document an entirely fictional misconception that Méliès died during the war, when in reality he was never forgotten, continued to perform as a stage magician until 1925, and had an enthusiastic fan following in the twenties from the Surrealists, even as the films themselves were fast vanishing. By 1931, when Selznick's book and Scorsese's film are set, an active rediscovery and rehabilitation was already well under way, with a gala screening in June 1930 of a newly rediscovered cache of his children's films, and an award in October 1931 from the Légion d'Honneur. Finally, while it's perfectly true that Méliès and his second wife Jehanne d'Alcy were a couple during his glory days, both of them were married to other people at the time.

Does any of this matter? Does cinema really need to be truth 24 times a second? Those who quote Godard's *not* tend to elide the less widely parroted second half,

"and every cut is a lie"; and Méliès was the first filmmaker to understand that the hidden spaces between the frames could be where the real work was done, and that the magic of cinema consisted in laminating reality into quantised slices and then cutting and shuffling the deck while ignoring the discards. But it's disconcerting to see a sesquicentennial celebration of the historical Méliès claim that it was Europe, not America, that put him out of business – the more so as Selznick's heroine Isabelle, played here by a bland and wooden Chloë Moretz, is a fictional double of the redoubtable Madeleine Malthête-Méliès, the granddaughter Georges and Jehanne raised after her mother's death in 1930, and whose original memoir celebrating the Méliès centenary in 1961 marked the year zero of modern Méliès biography. Thirty years ago, when hardly any of Méliès' films were in distribution, it was Madeleine's Francophone lecture roadshow that gave me my own first sight of many of the rarely-seen works. She's still around and thanked in Scorsese's film, and has passed the torch in her turn to younger members of the dynasty including her son, the great Méliès scholar Jacques Malthête. *Hugo* is a beautiful invention in its way, but one can't help feeling that a little more attention to truth might have served the real family better.



Mike Cahill's **ANOTHER EARTH** suspends a finely executed indie drama from one of the silliest premises in modern sf film, as drunk teen driver Brit Marling is momentarily distracted by the discovery of a counter-earth. The resulting crash kills music professor William Mapother's wife and kid, and on her release from jail she insinuates herself into her victim's life unrecognised by posing as a housecleaner, while applying in an essay competition to win a ticket on the privately-sponsored first flight to what has by now been established as an actual multiverse-compliant mirror

Earth. On the one hand, the central two-hander is beautifully constructed and played, as Marling finds herself helping to put the life she's destroyed back together, but only so long as she puts off unweaving the web of lies she's trapped herself in. The setting in New Haven (Cahill's hometown) is evocative and finely shot, and there's a pleasing twist ending in the very last, wordless shot. On the other...where to start? To buy the film at all, you have to suspend your resistance to a premise so completely fabulose that you're three quarters prepared for it to turn out all a dream and she's the one who's dead, or one of those twists. But no: the mirror earth is real, is populated by duplicates of all of us, is mysteriously beyond the reach of physical and electronic contact for four whole years, and is finally explored not by NASA but by private spaceflight, with a special place for anyone to become an astronaut simply by wanting it badly enough. There's some in-film rationalisation of its "broken mirror theory" of multiversality by audiobook

pop physicist Richard Berendzen, and Cahill did shoot some stuff about orbital mechanics and tidal interaction, but it was probably wise to cut the pretence to any kind of astrophysical sense.

Marling herself, who also co-wrote, has been eloquent about being forced down the indie road into writing her own roles by the misogynistic horrors of the role available to young blondes in Hollywood, and she has an excellent promotional narrative about turning down a job offer from Goldman Sachs in an e-mail from Cuba, where she was shooting her first documentary, which ran "No, thank you. I'm going to be an artist." (The vampire squids e-mailed back "Wow.") It therefore seems mean-spirited to wonder whether the film would have garnered as much attention if it didn't have a blonde indie poster girl fronting the publicity, standing with a fan on her hair in front of one of those giant planets hanging in our sky that have stamped themselves, thanks to *Melancholia* and *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, as 2011's image of the year. So let's not.



Still in Sundance-friendly indieland, Méliès' man in the moon has a significant speaking role in Miranda July's **THE FUTURE**, a deceptively lightfooted compendium of delicately observed moments in a relationship destabilised by the harmless-seeming commitment to adopt an injured cat, forcing the prospective host couple into long-term forward planning that pulls their lives apart. Most of the running time flows softly by in gentle deadpan vignettes, scripted with an elegantly minimalist comic precision, interspersed with rather sofa-scratching narratorial interludes in the

voice of the cat (the original performance element out of which the film project developed). It's fairly obvious that the cat stuff is really about having children, even without the fess-up in July's making-of book *It Chooses You*, which centres its story around her affecting research interviews in the homes of strangers selling things through small ads. The fantasy element comes into the film late and almost incidentally, though it proves pivotal for the outcome, as one character puts time on pause while the other, and the world, moves on. But there's also a twist at the end that reveals the whole thing as a kind of ghost story, and the lightness of touch as merely a gesture of distraction from what was cryptically described at the start as "the darkness that is not appropriate to talk about." So I shan't, except to say that it's hard to read the book and still resort to the words "whimsical" and "quirky" that seem to stick to July like fridge magnets, and that one of the most extraordinary characters in the film turns out to be a real-life ghost.



For viewers of more conventional ghost stories who figure they've seen enough of that *Sixth Sense* Othersy stuff to be able to see beyond the veil of any twist bowled at them, high-aiming chiller **THE AWAKENING** has the unbeatable counter-strategy of a concatenation of twists so supernaturally bonkers that nobody in their right senses could see them coming. Rebecca Hall's feisty seance-busting skeptic in a 1921 England bereaved of its senses, where everyone is haunted by their own ghosts, is tapped to expose a serial spook that's been frightening war orphans to death at a grim horror Hogwarts in the gothic north. But her arsenal of gloriously Bakelitepunk ghostbusting technology is no match for a creepy old school with a sinister doll's house full of Goreyesque mannequins in unsettling tableaux, and a gallery of characters with dark secrets, coarse war wounds, and a resident Steadicam that stalks her every move as she goes tiptoeing round poorly-lit landings at night. For three quarters of the film it's tremendously effective, with a bath scene even scarier than the one in *Hugo* with Sacha Baron Cohen and the 3D dog. But comes the point where the film has no choice but to demystify its mystery in a detonation of twists that blow the whole thing off the rails and down the embankment into the grey North Sea; and if you're hoping in the opening minutes that this isn't going to be a story about a freethinking feminist's forced surrender to the very sentimentality and superstition she's dedicated her life and sacrificed her happiness to combat, your faith is touching but irrational.



The historical stirrings of feminism are also the excuse to send an attractive heroine in to exorcise a world of haunted chaps in **THE THING**: an intriguing new experiment in the increasingly complex art of franchise extension, as a simultaneous remake and prequel to John Carpenter's 1982 remake, which itself largely ignored Howard Hawks' 1951 version to go back to John W. Campbell's original story and the elements Hawks had ignored. Though the 2011 version is careful to match-cut its ending with the 1982 opening, you can actually hear the prequelists cursing the Carpenter's version choice to make the Thing's first port of call a Norwegian base: "The last place you want to be," Mary Elizabeth Winstead is warned, "is cooped up with a dozen Norwegian guys." The film has gone to the trouble of casting real Norwegian actors in the support roles, but nothing in the 1982 version suggested a trace of visiting American leading ladies, so you spend the film suspecting the worst in a way that leaves the actual ending, when it comes, a bit of an anticlimax. The cycle of day and night looks oddly Canadian for Antarctica, and the period setting proves largely incidental, but Winstead's progress from the ignored and marginalised female to a torch-toting Ripley of the snows goes some way to repair the erasure of the Hawksian heroine from Carpenter's gruffly masculine version. The creature design riffs dutifully on the original, while showing off how much more it can do on the same design concepts with modern-day digital instruments; and the set pieces replay famous moments from the earlier versions with variations that will mean more if you can remember back to a time when we hadn't seen all the other films that Carpenter's version replicated itself into. Brr.



Up at the other pole, Earth's rotation is similarly disregarded in **ARTHUR CHRISTMAS**: a surprisingly complex sf-inflected meditation on the state of

Christmas present in an Amazonised world of global technocracy where the tension between sentimental customer-centredness and corporate logistics is giftwrapped in a distinctively British nostalgia for the colour red and a postal system that works. In the Aardman world, Christmas is run by a Murdoch-like dynasty comprising a superannuated figurehead and a brood of competitively disappointing children, of whom heir apparent Steve is a systems-oriented technocrat and Arthur a becardiganed people-centred nerk. But when the system loses a present on Christmas Eve and Steve's UFO-based dispatch can only promise delivery "within the window of Christmas", it's up to Arthur

to save the last child's Christmas by hand-delivering the missing item with a heritage sleigh drawn by traditional reindeer technology. As usual with British films for the global family market, it's essentially an unconvincing assertion of post-imperial delusions of mattering. When Grandsanta (b. 1875) comes out of retirement and screws things up royally, it's because "I just wanted them to remember who I used to be." At the end Arthur succeeds to the CEO mantle because he may be a bit rubbish but his heart's in the right place, and armies of elves are giving their all to make it happen; and that, girls and boys around the world, is why you should watch this film whether or not you actually enjoy it very much.



BREAKING DAWN PART 1 takes the last and maddest *Twilight* novel to the text's own midpoint break where Bella finally gets to lose her mortality and the series the last of its marbles. Poor Melissa Rosenberg, now writing for her fourth director on the series under Stephenie Meyer's cold red producer eye, has her work cut out in this thanklessly challenging instalment. For one thing, there is no action whatever, unless one counts the honeymoon bonkathon elided here in a discreet 12-cert break ahead of the wrecked-bridal-suite reveal that induces guffaws even from the most sympathetic viewing sisterhoods. In desperation, the film has made space for a climactic werewolf battle that in the book was negotiated out of happening, which I rather thought was the whole point. Indeed, one of the gently subversive things

Meyer is doing is showing her readers a world where the violence constantly below the surface is repeatedly contained by the assertion of civilising practices and hardly anyone ever gets actually hurt, least of all the undeserving. She does it again with the epic damp squib of a finale at the volume's climax, where a Potteresque final battle sputters out preemptively before it even starts. How *Part 2* is going to deal with that will be interesting to see.

As it happens, the first half of *Breaking Dawn* is essentially unfilmable anyway. The second hour of the film covers the section of the book where Meyer allowed herself to drop Bella as narrator in favour of amiable teen wolf Jacob – the novels' most appealing character, and a voice she clearly enjoys writing in. Unfortunately Jake is the character most clumsily mishandled in

the films, with none of his sparky wit and in-group bickering surviving in the Taylor Lautner version of the character; and the key novelistic payoff of having Jacob as narrator is that Jacob is telepathically networked to the other members of his pack, as well as being in this section accessible to Edward's own mindreading powers – so that most of the actual plot takes place in a dense flurry of italicised conversations inside the characters' heads. It's hard to think of anything cinema is less equipped to show, as indeed is amply demonstrated by the risibly voiceovered werewolf war council and the on-the-nose exchanges summarising interminable chapters of subtextual chatter.

And yet, even at its most eye-rollingly bonkers, the series is rarely less than squirmily compelling on its real subject: the transition out of girlhood, amid the seething inarticulate tribal passions of high-school peers, and into an unnervingly alien adult state from which you can never return. In that respect, at least, this shot of *Breaking Dawn* delivers without anaesthesia, as Bella is catapulted from the pale thin vampire wedding of her dreams straight into accelerated up-the-duffness and being horribly consumed from within by a mutant thing who loves mommy very much and wishes she had some of her blood. Even when you know exactly what the final shot is going to be, the film's unflinching depiction of pregnancy and childbirth is fair warning to any teens tempted to disregard the series' anti-sex, pro-life message; and when half the kids in kindergarten five years hence are called Renesmee Katniss, you'll know exactly whose mommies have only themselves to blame.



It's a vintage month for howling at the moon when there's something madder than *Twilight*; but here comes Tarsem Singh's **IMMORTALS**, bringing to the screen at last a timeless story that has been for the past thirty years the cherished pet project of one of cinema's all-time great visual stylists and one-of-a-kind creative minds. Admittedly that project is called *Theseus and the Minotaur*, and the director is Terry Gilliam. But Gilliam's film now seems at a low point of likeliness ever to happen, and in its absence we have this: easily the strangest sword-and-sandal film since Giorgio Ferroni's Catholic take on Euripides in 1962's *Le Baccanti*. Divine bastard Henry Cavill (already looking spookily like a young Christopher Reeve) gets his hero's journey on as he discovers his true paternity and races theomachous tyrant Mickey Rourke for mastery of a self-loading bow that can kill gods. Along the way he encounters a labyrinth, a minotaur that sterilises mankind by hammering them in the nuts, and a plot-foreseeing oracle virgin called Phaedra who has to be shown a good time before she gives the whole film away; but these fleeting gestures to canonicity, and some snatches of very bad classical Greek very badly pronounced as modern, are islets of familiarity in an oceanic archipelago of estrangement.

Manifesting to mortal eyes as a knockoff of *Clash of the Titans* in the style of *300*, it actually shares little more than adoptive ancestry with the immortals of the big screen, with a far stronger familial likeness to its unacknowledged bastard maternity of *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Written by a pair of Greek-American brothers, it scrambles names and motifs from Theseid and Titanomachy into a studiously baffling Xenaesque mashup of insouciant anachronism, syncretism, and casual

decide, but without the meretricious validation of postmodern feminist irony that impishly rationalised *Xena* as simply undoing millennia of the herstorical warrior princess's patriarchal erasure from her rightful place at the centre of all the old world's master narratives from Bible to *Beowulf*. With all sense of humour disabled, Tarsem's film leaves us no choice but to confront the stark surrealism of the cast's attempt to deliver lines like "Fellow Hellenics, the Heraclean king has seized the Sybelline (*sic*) Monastery!" Yet what nevertheless lifts it above *300*, *Troy*, *Clash*, and the rest is a genuinely numinous sense of pagan godhead, and the power of these primal Hesiodic forces' interactions with our fragile world as the battlefield for their own barely imaginable wars. The final sequence (which oddly was the very first teaser released) caps everything with an astonishing view of the heavens as a living ceiling of battling gods in a daytime starfield of infinite depth and numbers; and the whole thing is designed and staged in Tarsem's most eyepopping visual blowout yet, with his regular costume designer Eiko Ishioka unleashed on the production with a ferocity that would make Krakens quake, as the captive Freida Pinto and her decoys model a range of outrageous lampshade headgear, and Rourke dismisses her sacred order with "The priest wears a ridiculous hat!" (Deadpan cut to insert shot of the hat.) And whisper it, but the 3D conversion looks terrific: surely the first time those words have ever been set in type. Next up from Tarsem is a daring stunt leap from one overloaded bandwagon to another with his own take on the revisionist-fairytale picture in *Snow White* revamp *Mirror, Mirror*. Whatever's awaiting us in his looking-glass world, at least it'll deliver a rocket to the eye.

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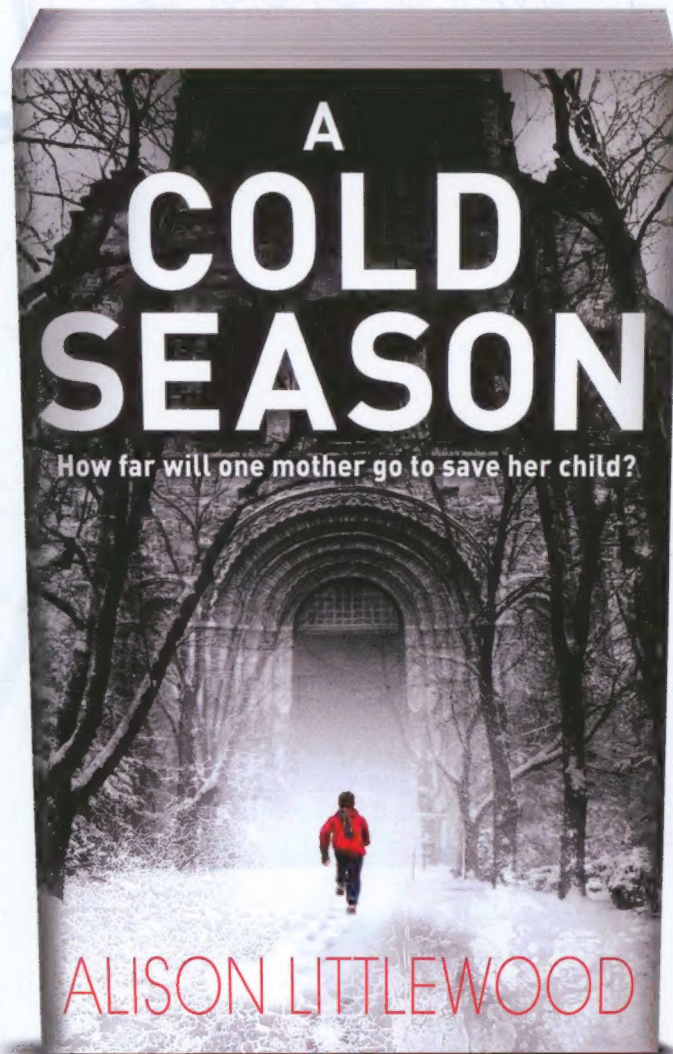
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